



THE TALES OF
Book VIII
MARIELLE CLARAC

The Applause
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro





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❁ Julianne Silvestre (née Sorel)

19 years old. Marielle's best friend and an avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content. Engaged to Prince Severin after being adopted into House Silvestre.

❁ Henriette de Lagrange

20 years old. Prince Severin's youngest sister. Can seem imposing, but is a sweet and openhearted princess.

❁ Liberto Fontana

26 years old. Heir to the Grand Duchy of Lavia and Princess Henriette's betrothed. A man of delicate beauty who appears to be kind in nature.

❁ Lutin

An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.

❁ Grace Blanche

An actress at a popular theater. A gorgeous woman with a sophisticated air.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac, now married to Simeon. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 28-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Highly skilled, but with a tendency to be too serious and inflexible. He is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

The city was home to no small number of fabulous entertainment venues, but one was particularly popular with its never-ending stream of visitors. Far from its large hall where music and shows were performed to cheering audiences, its upper floor was home to an array of private rooms, each with an air of exclusivity. At the farthest end, away from all prying eyes, a man and a woman were having a secret rendezvous.

The room was one of the venue's more understated options, but when the restless man sat down, he was nonetheless surrounded by decidedly exquisite decor. The chair, with a beautiful woven pattern on its seat and back, received him gently. He'd worn his best suit to avoid looking out of place, but sadly he was outshone by the quality of the furnishings.

His young face, full of vitality, had a masculine handsomeness to it, and he had taken great pains to force his ever-unruly hair into a gentlemanly style. Despite appearances, however, it was more than obvious that he wasn't accustomed to such places. The atmosphere had overwhelmed him straight away, and he hunched up, looking very uncomfortable indeed.

The woman who sat down across from him had her face hidden by a lace veil. Her velvet dress, appropriate for the late autumn season, was dark brown. It appeared plain at first glance, but the design was in keeping with the latest fashion. The figure-hugging skirt emphasized her dainty silhouette. This type of dress was also favored by the courtesans who worked here, as it was optimal for showing off one's sensual appeal. However, unlike the courtesans, this woman was rather lacking in curves. Her thin limbs, which held not even a smidgen of voluptuous charm, still looked like those of an adolescent.

Once they both were settled, the woman spoke first. "I'm awfully sorry to have brought you to a place like this."

Her mouth and chin were barely visible below the veil's hem. Of her face, which could not be called beautiful, this portion was the only acceptably well-

shaped feature. Her mouth was neither too large nor too small, her lips neither too thick nor too thin. The red lipstick she wore made a striking impression against her plain-colored dress and mostly concealed face.

It seemed to have unwittingly drawn the man's attention. He quietly cleared his throat and pulled himself together. "I could say the same thing. It must have been quite an ordeal for you to come here."

"I arranged for them to let me in through the back entrance secretly. I don't think anybody saw me."

The man paused awkwardly. "Someone of your status shouldn't have to be sneaking around. It only goes to show how useless I am."

"Don't talk like that. You're going to all this trouble for me. You should know how much I appreciate it."

"That's quite all right. It's my duty, after all. I'll do anything I can to shield you from being vilified in the eyes of the public." He wavered a moment. "It would be easier if we could make a public announcement, of course."

"That's true. I wish we could, but we still have to keep it a secret for now. We have to take extra precautions to ensure that no one finds out about our relationship."

"Indeed."

He extended his hands toward hers, which were resting on the table. The gazes of this pair who shared a secret became intertwined. There was little need for words. Not wishing to waste their limited time together, they both leaned in, closing the distance between them.

Just then, forceful footsteps could be heard outside the room moments before the door flew open without a knock. A powerful voice struck the couple. "Marielle!"

The newcomer, a young man with hair a pale shade of blond, strode across the room, a stiff expression on his features so perfect they could belong to a doll. Reflexively, the seated man rose halfway to his feet. The woman gasped. Icy blue eyes looked down at them both from behind a pair of glasses.

A supremely low-pitched voice emerged from his well-formed lips. “What are you doing here?” He practically forced the words out, as if he didn’t want to believe what he was seeing, but the undeniable sight before him left him angry and resentful.

“Goodness gracious!” the woman exclaimed. “A husband catching his wife in the act of unfaithfulness! I never dreamed I’d have the opportunity to research a scene like this firsthand! Please don’t misunderstand, however. The only one I love is you, Lord Simeon! Down to my very soul, I belong to you alone! Not counting Chouchou, of course.”

“I know that! That was *not* the question I was asking. Hold on—do I take second place to a cat?!”

“You’re in joint first place. I must say, though, that’s a rather easygoing reply for someone who was so recently suffering from rather strong feelings of apprehension and inferiority!”

“Well, perhaps, but... No, that’s of no consequence right now! Explain yourself!”

“There you go changing the subject!”

“You’re the one who’s changing the subject!”

Caught between the arguing husband and wife, the other man sighed deeply and sat down again. “Didn’t you tell him what was going on? If you arranged a secret meeting like this, you can hardly blame him for being worried.”

Under his chiding gaze, she—I, that is—threw off the veil. It was only getting in the way.

“I left a message that he should come to pick me up. The time I specified was later than this, however. I’m surprised he’s here so early.”

Still standing, my husband looked at me. To blend in among the ladies of the evening working at this establishment as best I could, I had adopted a style of hair and makeup to give me a grown-up look quite unlike my usual aura. He heaved a powerful sigh. “You said you would be visiting your family, but then your message said to collect you at Tarentule—the brothel. How could I maintain my composure after hearing that?”

“I didn’t lie to you. I went to my family home first to reapply my makeup, and then I came here. Traveling straight here in a House Flaubert carriage would have been too risky, so I switched to a fiacre mid-journey. That was why I wanted you to pick me up. I decided that if we left together, then even in the unlikely event that we’re spotted, I’d be taken for a lady of the evening that you’re bringing home.”

“That would damage my reputation!”

“It’s fine. It’s quite common in society.”

With the door still open, our voices could evidently be heard from outside, as a group of young women came peering in. They were this establishment’s premier attraction, the beautiful Three Flowers.

“It is *not* fine by any stretch of the imagination,” Lord Simeon argued. “I don’t want people to say I’ve been intimately involved with a woman other than you, even if it’s merely rumor. You are the one and only person I desire.”

Filled with amusement, the Three Flowers began to interject with somewhat frivolous remarks.

“Good heavens,” said one. “What a thing for a straitlaced man to say with such earnestness!”

“I feel the same way, my beloved. Alas, I had no choice. Unavoidable circumstances forced my hand.”

“But the lady won’t be outdone!” came another interjection.

“I don’t know the situation, of course,” my husband replied, “but it’s hard to believe there was no other recourse.”

“Oh my, the situation has descended into full-on chaos! There’s nothing more dramatic than an encounter between the husband and the secret paramour,” came yet another.

Lord Simeon finally lost patience and turned to the three ladies. “You almost seem happy about it! Could I please ask you to be quiet for a moment?”

His tolerance for jibes was still low—even for mild ones. *I’ll have to train my husband to let this sort of thing roll off his back.*

His objection, however, only made the trio burst into uproarious laughter. They crowded around the other man sitting in the chair.

“Well? Nothing from the paramour?” one of them prodded.

“It’s no fun if you just watch in silence,” another added. “You have to step into the fray!”

“I’m not her ‘paramour,’” he replied weakly.

Mr. Paul Satie, the young owner of Satie Publishing and also my editor, let out another heavy breath as he leaned on the table and rested his cheeks in his hands. He picked up the large, thick envelope that he had been about to hand me earlier. Stuffed inside was none other than a manuscript. Holding it up, Mr. Satie entreated, “I’m sorry for all this fuss, but I’d like to focus on our meeting first. You can’t have rented this room for very long, surely.”

“Oh, extending the booking would be no issue!” announced Isabelle.

“Why don’t you stay the night, in fact?” Chloe pressed. “We’ll keep you company!”

Flanked by the strong-willed redhead and the sweet blonde, Mr. Satie shrank back. “I’m not made of money, you know. I run a small-time publishing company that’s one stiff breeze away from collapse. I could never afford your services.”

“Agnès owes you an awful lot, doesn’t she?” said Olga. “We’ve also benefited greatly from your work. Our enjoyment from reading Satie Publishing’s books covers the fee quite handsomely.”

The graceful brunette slid a fingertip along his cheek, positively radiating mature sensuality. Mr. Satie turned red in the face and took on an inscrutable expression, a cold sweat coming over him. “N-N-N-No,” he uttered, “that’s...not what I... I have Natalie, you see...”

Tarentule’s most renowned, most magnificent trio had overwhelmed Mr. Satie. More sorry to his fiancée than the man himself, I offered some help. “Olga, Chloe, Isabelle—would you be kind enough to leave it at that? Mr. Satie is about to be married.”

Isabelle huffed. “How dull. His face fits my preferences to a tee and everything.”

“You do tend to like men with an air of innocence about them, don’t you?” Chloe replied. “You were the first one to attempt an advance on Lord Simeon as well, as I recall. He rejected you utterly, of course.”

“He gave you the cold shoulder too, Chloe! Lord Simeon is less ‘innocent’ and more simply obstinate. Though I did think it would be fun to make such a serious and stubborn man fall from grace.”

Olga added, “Agnès did the job for us, didn’t she? She wrapped the oh-so-untouchable-looking Vice Captain around her little finger, making him experience intense highs and lows, leaving him powerless in the face of love. How truly entertaining!”

“My word, Olga, teasing him in such a gentle tone!” I cut in. “I know Lord Simeon looks fierce, but you shouldn’t torment him so. He can’t take it at all.”

“Maybe you should consider not tormenting your own husband,” put forward Mr. Satie.

“Can we *please* return to the matter at hand?!” Lord Simeon shouted. He’d clearly grown impatient again at everyone chattering all at once without restraint.

Mr. Satie jumped in his seat, while the Three Flowers let out screams that sounded affected; the smiles never left their faces.

Once quiet was restored, Lord Simeon turned to me with a look of thorough exhaustion. “Now, please explain things from the beginning.”

Wondering where to start, I cocked my head.

In spring of this year, the much-talked-about female author Agnès Vivier, real name Marielle Clarac, had married and become Marielle Flaubert. It had all unfolded like a romantic tale, with a plain girl from an insignificant viscountcy coming to learn that the heir to a prestigious earldom had fallen in love with her at first sight and a storybook wedding to follow.

Now my dear husband, Lord Simeon, was a wonderful man indeed. His

alabaster complexion and dashing features were garnished with pale blond hair and light blue eyes. He was tall, slender, and refined, like Prince Charming from a fairy tale. Beyond that, however, he was a strong and sincere military officer serving as the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. He was dedicated daily to his training and professional duties, and he held his subordinates to the same rigorous standard. To his enemies, he showed no mercy, trouncing them thoroughly with his unmatched ingenuity and combat ability. His allies feared him too, making him the epitome of the brutal, blackhearted military officer. This was my beloved, the Demon Vice Captain who looked most perfect of all with a riding crop in his hand—Lord Simeon!

Some of my personal feelings may have intruded there.

Matters of opinion aside, Lord Simeon's military expertise was undeniable. All the same, he was a kind husband in our home life. My newlywed days were full of joy. His family, House Flaubert, had taken me in, and I was getting along well with them too. Before I had realized it, winter was nearly upon us. The leaves I'd seen changing color through the window had begun to fall.

Soon enough, I was sure, the vista would transform into a white wonderland. Lord Simeon and I would nestle close together by the fire, gazing out at the snowy landscape, him relaxing with a good book while I knit a shawl for him. The cat would take the warmest spot all for herself and lie there sprawled out. Such tranquil days were just around the corner.

The seasons keep turning endlessly, yet though the same ones return again and again, we experience them differently each iteration. As time continued to pass, I myself encountered new kinds of excitement every day. The peaceful, ordinary life I spent alongside Lord Simeon was a world of glimmering bliss. Even if worrying incidents happened around us, even if we were occasionally embroiled in an intrigue that shook the royal family, even if we were occasionally put in mortal danger...

All right, maybe our lives weren't especially ordinary after all. *Still, that doesn't change the fact that I'm happy! If Lord Simeon is with me, I have nothing to fear. When we're together, we can get through anything, come what may.* That was why I never faltered—why I always strode forward boldly. I had to seek out the new joys and thrills that awaited me in the world.

“To cut a long story short, we’re facing an identity exposure crisis.”

“You’ve cut things too short, Marielle. I don’t follow at all.”

Today as ever, the city of flowers, Sans-Terre, was brimming with life and abuzz with any number of hot topics. Why don’t we embrace the excitement and see what’s waiting just around the corner?

Chapter Two

Owing to the large population of the city center relative to the amount of space, most residents in the heart of Sans-Terre lived in apartments. Detached houses with spacious gardens were nowhere to be seen until the outskirts.

Aside from its age, one particular apartment building close to the downtown area apparently wasn't too bad compared to similar dwellings. It stood four stories high, and each unit was laid out with a small kitchen and three other small rooms. The windows looking down on the street faced east, so they caught the sun for half of the day. This gave the apartments a bright, clean atmosphere, and even the building's vintage added a pleasant charm. I was thrilled to have been granted such a marvelous safe haven.

What made this place especially wonderful were its interior doors concealed from the outside. Of the apartments on the fourth floor, three were connected on the inside. They had originally been built as separate dwellings, naturally. The landlord lived in one, but as his children grew up and got married, it had gotten to be close quarters, so they started using the neighboring apartments on both sides as well. Then, since going between them was inconvenient, they opened up a way between them through the walls.

"If you enter through the separate apartments," Lord Simeon explained, "no one will know that you're convening inside. You can thus have meetings here while pretending to have no connection to the other participants. Of course, you'll have to mind your appearance when coming and going. You must look as though you live here or are visiting someone who does. That should be enough to mislead any prying eyes for now."

Mr. Satie went wide-eyed, as did the other editors who had come with him.

I couldn't suppress my rising exhilaration. I went around opening all the doors and looking into all of the apartments. Returning to the room where everyone else was waiting, I exclaimed, "Remarkable! It's like a spooky mansion full of hidden passages!"

I threw my arms around my husband.

“Thank you so much, Lord Simeon! Only you would find a solution like this. That’s my beloved blackhearted military officer! When it comes to hatching a scheme, no one else can compare!”

“I don’t feel it justifies such a grandiose statement.” Putting his arms around me to hold me back slightly, he stroked my head with a long-suffering look.

The gesture was meant as a soothing one, but my excitement couldn’t be subdued so easily. “The cramped size only adds to the atmosphere. It reminds me of a secret chamber at the palace.”

“Cramped?!” Mr. Satie exclaimed. “This is downright spacious. Damned nobles!”

“How do you know about the secret chambers?” Lord Simeon asked. “Have you sneaked inside them?”

I ignored both men. “I believe I read about a building like this one in a novel once. Ah, yes! There was a dead body sealed up in a wall just over there.”

Mr. Satie shuddered. “No thank you! I’d rather not spend any time in a place like that!”

“There have only ever been burglaries and an attempted murder here,” Lord Simeon reassured him. “No record of anyone going missing. All the locks have been changed since, of course.”

“An attempted murder?!”

“A domestic dispute that went a tad too far, I’m told.”

As the men talked, I pulled away from Lord Simeon and spun around to look at the whole room. It was all so interesting, so thrilling. I couldn’t have been happier. “I wish I could live here with you, Lord Simeon! Cuddling up in a small apartment, just the two of us, in a poor but happy existence. In fact, why don’t we stay the night here at some point?”

“You’d find it impossible to live without servants,” he replied.

“I know how to bake bread!”

“I doubt you know how to light a fire, though. And how would you dress yourself? Can you prepare a bath, or even a washbasin?”

While I cheerfully pictured the scene and Lord Simeon gazed at me affectionately, Mr. Satie and the others looked peevish for some reason.

“I can’t stand listening to you nobles anymore,” my editor groaned. “Can you *please* return to the real world?”

The events leading up to our secret apartment meeting were slightly convoluted. It had been ten days since Lord Simeon burst into the room I rented at Tarentule for a conference with Mr. Satie. Even while trembling and shrinking back in the face of Lord Simeon’s penetrating gaze, Mr. Satie explained the situation.

“Gossip rag reporters have been snooping around the publishing house. They’re digging into every person who visits the office in an attempt to expose my authors’ true identities.”

“Hence having a meeting elsewhere?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Olga made tea for everyone. Mr. Satie brought his cup to his lips in an effort to calm himself. The moment it made contact, his eyes widened in sheer wonder. In contrast, Lord Simeon showed no emotion whatsoever. He was tasting tea from the highest quality leaves that had been prepared with the utmost skill imaginable—not to mention by one of the most beautiful women imaginable—but he had no reaction at all. *He’s the heir to a major house! Does he have no sense of taste with either his tongue or his eyes?! My word!*

I thanked Olga for the tea and took a sip myself. The cup was decorated with a splendid pattern of violets. Even though I wasn’t a real customer, she’d still remembered that they were my favorite.

“She mustn’t come to the office no matter what,” Mr. Satie continued, “and it’s risky for me to visit her as well. There’s a strong chance I’ll be followed, and I can’t let them see me entering a nobleman’s manor.”

“I understand that much, but why come here of all places?” Lord Simeon

asked, his gaze turning to me.

Despite the reproachful glint in his eyes, I replied with my head held high. “I followed His Highness’s example!”

Lord Simeon froze for a brief moment, then cradled his head in his hands, groaning.

“He said that this place is perfectly suited to confidential meetings. So in keeping with his wisdom, I decided to rent a room here.”

“That was certainly *not* why he told you that!”

Prince Severin, the heir apparent to the Kingdom of Lagrange as well as Lord Simeon’s master and best friend, had enlightened me to this strategy. Tarentule never divulged its clients’ secrets. Also, the gossip rags’ snooping likely extended no further than the grand hall where the shows were held. Even if they dared to follow someone deeper inside, clients who made private reservations never saw one another’s faces. They were always led to their rooms separately, and it was impossible to peer inside or overhear anything.

“Mr. Satie pretended to be an ordinary customer and I made my appearance indistinguishable from the courtesans’. In renting the room, I finally made some use of my manuscript fees, which I’ve simply been saving up. Oh, that money was meant to be my dowry, so I suppose I’ve used it without permission. My apologies.”

“It’s your money,” Lord Simeon replied, “though if you continue spending it on such expensive endeavors, you’ll quickly burn through it. If you need funds, tell me and I’ll— Wait, that’s beside the point!” Just when he was on the verge of regaining his usual demeanor, his expression turned harsh again.

“Admittedly, this will deter the reporters,” he conceded, “but it causes other problems. Not only are the costs excessive, but Mr. Satie will be thought of as someone who frequents ladies of the evening.”

“I explained everything to Natalie in advance,” I replied. “I even promised her I’d keep watch to ensure Mr. Satie wouldn’t stray.”

“Of course I wouldn’t!” the editor interjected. “If I developed an interest in the flowers of Tarentule, I’d go broke in an instant! In fact, the reporters must

know I'd never have that kind of money. If anything, they'd be inclined to think one of the flowers was an author."

The Three Flowers started giggling. They each spoke in turn.

"What would be wrong with that?"

"I'd love for someone to think I was a famous author."

"I know it would be scandalous for a noblewoman, but for us, it could be good publicity!"

"Hence why they were happy to oblige me," I said in summation.

Lord Simeon closed his mouth, looking as though he had a headache.

This problem had not sprung up out of nowhere. Its roots ran quite deep. Romance novels for women had gained widespread popularity since Mr. Satie opened his publishing company, but there were still many people who viewed them with prejudice. Until very recently, the mere existence of female authors had gone unacknowledged. It was taken for granted that women couldn't pen novels worth reading. Mr. Satie had challenged that notion, and now novels written by women for women were bringing joy to countless readers who ardently supported them.

It had become an established field in just a few short years, but there were still naysayers. Many forbade their wives or daughters from these books, claiming that if women were to read such lowbrow dross, it would have a bad influence and drive them to unchaste behavior. This view was not restricted to men either; some women held the same belief. The higher a family's social status, the higher their propensity to share in that mindset. Nobles as open-minded as my parents or House Flaubert were far from the norm.

In spite of this, everyone read them in secret. Lately, it was even treated as an open secret that the princess was a fan. The greater the readership grew, the more the criticism and judgment of the books abated. Actually writing them, however, was a different story altogether. Ladies of good houses were not supposed to work at all, and only a limited set of professions was available to them without damaging their house's honor. Author was not among them.

After I got engaged to Lord Simeon, it was a foregone conclusion that I would

keep my writing career a secret. That he proposed to me already knowing about it was an exceptional case. Ordinarily, if I had been discovered, a suitor would have broken off our engagement immediately.

My husband truly is a wonderful person. Even though he's stubborn and overly serious and can be tactless at times, he's accepting of other people's values. Even in matters he doesn't understand, he tries to meet in the middle and compromise. He doesn't simply jump straight to mocking people. He's a good man with an honest heart.

"I knew I loved you!" I cried, snuggling up next to him on the couch, overcome with adoration.

"Don't suddenly change the subject, please," he replied curtly.

Honestly, what sort of a response is that to your wife expressing her feelings for you?!

"I'm impressed that you can take these leaps of logic in stride so easily," Mr. Satie interjected. "Would it be all right to get back to the matter at hand?"

We both turned to face him.

He continued, "Tarentule is fine as a one-off venue, but I don't think we can meet here over and over. Not for every single author. That's what I wanted to discuss today."

"You wished to ask Marielle if she might be able to suggest a location that would serve in the longer term, in other words?"

Despite being told so little, Lord Simeon understood straight away. He appeared neither angry nor reproachful, but his face as he seriously considered the matter was both dashing and rather intense. Mr. Satie recoiled again.

"Yes," he murmured, "though I acknowledge it's an impudent request. I'll search as well, of course!"

"Hmm." Lord Simeon put a hand to his chin, deep in thought.

Meanwhile, I struck up some chatter with the Three Flowers. "I wonder what kind of place would be suitable for keeping reporters at bay," I mused.

"Anywhere that's known to belong to a noble house would be no good,

certainly. It would have to be somewhere more ordinary, like a commoner's house, or somewhere that you can arrange an individual room."

"Could you rent a meeting room somewhere? It can't be that expensive if you don't need to stay the night there."

"The problem isn't the room itself, but being seen when you enter and leave. No matter how careful you are, the gossip columnists can follow you in secret and ultimately pin down your identity. That's the main tool of their trade."

"And we can't avoid that no matter where we go," I concluded.

The four of us tilted our heads to the side and hummed ponderously.

Lord Simeon spoke again. "Could you give me a little time? I'll try searching."

His tone didn't suggest he had any concrete leads, though it did seem like he had an idea. Hope lit up not only my face, but also Mr. Satie's.

With the talented Lord Simeon on the case, there was no way we'd be without a solution for long. Hence it was no great surprise when he announced that he'd arranged a location for us to use less than half a month later. He contacted Mr. Satie and his staff as well, then took us to see this old apartment building. Though I'd believed we'd encounter the same issues no matter what sort of place we rented, the surprising hidden routes between the apartments made all the difference. As ever, there were no words to describe my husband's impressive skills.

"Well done finding this place in little more than a week," I praised him.

"I asked a broker to show me buildings with multiple vacant apartments, as buying such a place would allow us to renovate the inside as we see fit and connect the units together. That was how I came to learn of this one, where they were already connected. The location seemed suitable as well, so I saw no reason to hesitate."

"You mean to say you purchased it? You're not renting the place?" My assumption had been so strong that his words gave me severe pause.

With a nonchalant attitude, he replied, "Yes. The landlord is getting on in

years, so he put it up for sale, feeling that it had become too difficult to manage the property any longer. His son is living overseas right now and can't take it over, apparently."

I wasn't the only one surprised. Mr. Satie's eyes widened even further, as did those of the other staff present.

"You *bought* a whole apartment building?" Mr. Satie asked, struggling with the words. "Just like that? All we needed was a meeting room."

Looking back over my shoulder at my editor, I agreed, "It must surely have been quite expensive."

Mr. Satie nodded with an indescribable expression somewhere between pained and stunned. "Even if it's not a prime location, it's central enough that it would command a hefty price."

Cornu, another editor, interjected as well. "This sort of building is mostly owned by folks who've been here long enough to own the property for ages. No ordinary person would be able to afford a place like this today."

Nervous, I turned back to Lord Simeon. "How much was it?" I asked at last.

As if confused by our reactions, Lord Simeon inclined his head slightly. "The price wasn't exorbitant. It was roughly the same as that necklace I bought you."

"Which one?"

"The diamond one."

That necklace? The one he'd given me as a birthday present—the absurdly opulent one with multiple large diamonds? It was far too extravagant, of course, and didn't suit me at all. After I'd worn it at our wedding reception, it had taken up residence in my dresser. The thought behind the gift had made me happy, but the necklace itself left me at my wits' end wondering why he hadn't chosen something less assuming.

Roughly in that price range? Either this building was surprisingly cheap, or the necklace was even more expensive than I thought. The latter possibility only gave me more trepidation.

"You needn't be so concerned. In terms of real estate, I can assure you this

was in the cheap bracket. The plot of land is rather small, and it was put on the market under the assumption that the building would be demolished and replaced. It was actually cheaper than buying the land alone because of the old building that came with it and the fact that there are remaining residents with whom negotiation is required.”

I exhaled slowly. Honestly, I still didn’t follow. Even though I’d gained all sorts of knowledge about commoners’ ways of life and different areas of the city, the real estate trade was unknown territory for me. If nothing else, I was dubious as to whether Lord Simeon’s idea of “the cheap bracket” conformed to a widely held definition of the phrase. One thing was clear, however. This was no casual purchase you’d make on a whim. It had undoubtedly cost Lord Simeon a small fortune.

“I’m so sorry,” I told him. “I didn’t mean for you to incur such an expense over my career.”

“It’s a sum I’m entirely comfortable with. Besides, real estate is an asset with practical value. Depending on how you use it, its worth can increase over time. Oh, incidentally, I listed you as the owner on the deed. I plan to put more property in your name in the future. If the worst should happen, I need to ensure that you’ll have enough assets of your own to live untroubled. I’ve drawn up a will as well, but property with your name already on the deed is the most certain and straightforward approach.”

He had brought up an unthinkable subject as if it were an incidental detail. This only made me wince even more. “I appreciate the sentiment, but I’m not sure I could manage an apartment building.”

“I assigned a reliable manager as well, naturally. Should the need arise, you can also liquidate your jewels, so I’ll continue to purchase more of those as well. Don’t worry about a thing.”

And here I was thinking he was indiscriminately buying me extravagant jewels. Had this been his intention all along? It made all manner of sense, yet it had me at my wits’ end all over again. *Sell gifts from my husband? I’d never! Even if they don’t suit me, they are all precious treasures!*

“Thank you,” I replied once I had gathered my thoughts. “I deeply appreciate

your concern for my well-being, but whatever financial assets I have, I don't ever want to lose you. I'd rather not talk about how I'd cope after your death. Instead of worrying about your will and such, could you please try to live a long life?"

"I know I sound like an elderly man or a patient on his last legs, but of course I intend to do just that. I'm still in my twenties, I'm physically fit, and I have no illnesses. I will be absolutely fine."

"Oh no! People who say that always die early! It's a common twist in stories." I groaned. "What unsettling foreshadowing!"

"It is not! Any family thinks about this sort of thing. It's normal."

"Not for commoners!" Mr. Satie interrupted, a touch of desperation in his voice. "Are you quite finished?! I don't want to hear any more of your strange conversations from a different world!"

This pulled the two of us back to reality. *Oh, yes, this wasn't what we were talking about at all.* When I looked over my shoulder, Mr. Satie and his fellow editors did not look best pleased.

"We'll gladly use this building for meetings," he continued, "but how much will you charge us in rent?"

The man sounded thoroughly exhausted. *Why? What did we do?*

"Rent?" Lord Simeon repeated. He looked surprised to be asked such a thing. "That hadn't occurred to me. Marielle, as I said, you're the owner. You can decide as you see fit."

My voice wavered. "Really? But you're the one who bought this building."

"Not with the intention of collecting rent. Honestly, the amount would be too small to be worth the trouble."

"Then can't we just say it's free?"

"That makes sense. There's no need to fuss with collecting payment."

"You damned nobles!" Mr. Satie exclaimed. "Thank you most kindly!"

With this exchange, our most pressing problem was solved. Now we could

keep the gossip columnists off our tails for the time being. But if we only used this one building, we'd be caught before too long. In light of this, we continued the search for additional options while we began to hold meetings again.

At first, the other authors were bewildered by the idea of altering their appearances and entering in secret, but they quickly got used to it and began to enjoy it. They were novelists, after all. They all had a great sense of adventure. Some were even daring enough to try dressing in men's clothes. Naturally, I put my all into it as well. Now was the time to put my mastery of disguise and my ability to blend into the background to good use. At times, I walked right past reporters who must have been following the editors, but they didn't even notice me.

Gradually, my new book drew closer to completion. As I was reaching that point, a major news story hit the headlines not just in the gossip rags, but in all the papers. Prince Liberto of Lavia had finally come to Lagrange! This official visit of the man betrothed to Henriette, the younger of Lagrange's two princesses, had been in planning for quite some time.

The public had a voracious appetite for stories about royal marriages. When the Lavian prince arrived, reporters had apparently crowded in front of the palace's main gate, lying in wait and eager to ensure they didn't miss the big event. The illustrations accompanying the news articles only fueled the public's excitement. Though the drawings were completed in a short space of time, the supremely skilled artists worked hard to capture the scene. In drawings composed of few strokes, they precisely recreated the prince's features and vividly portrayed the moment. Prince Liberto, smiling out at the crowd from his carriage window, was so dashing that it was only natural Princess Henriette had fallen in love at first sight based on his portrait.

Chapter Three

Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto's engagement had been made official early in the year when there was still snow covering the ground. Despite our nations' close proximity, neither party was able to travel abroad at the drop of a hat. As such, they had not yet met in person before now. Theirs was a purely political betrothal.

As you'd expect of a grand duchy, Lavia was a very small country. However, it was not to be underestimated. It had a great deal of economic power centered on moneylending, and it held great religious significance as well with a head temple within its borders. The geography that now formed Lavia was once the heart of a large empire that had ruled the northern continent, and even if the division of its nations had changed over the course of history, the language and culture remained. In fact, in the regions close to the border, Lavian was spoken more than Lagrangian.

Also, since Lavia was sandwiched between Lagrange and Easdale, the two countries were, in a sense, supporting peace there by keeping one another in check. If one of them invaded, the other was certain to react. Rather than allowing a large-scale war to break out and ravage the land, it was better to use Lavia as a buffer zone and reap the rewards of civil interaction—so it was seen in the modern era.

Viewed the other way around, however, Lavia was continually involved in the discord between the other two. There were even opposing groups within Lavia—a Lagrange faction and an Easdale faction. Lord Simeon and I still bore fresh memories of being dragged into that conflict and suffering for it.

Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto's engagement was born of these circumstances. The current grand duchess was of Easdalian birth, so Lagrange needed to make up for lost ground. Luckily, Easdale didn't have a princess of the right age, so we came out victorious.

Princess Henriette always kept the portraits and photographs she'd been sent

of her betrothed close at hand and she eagerly awaited his correspondence, but she was also worried about whether he'd like her. She was a bride who had been pushed on him, after all. That was why I was quite relieved to see her standing next to Prince Liberto at the welcome party with a happy look on her face. He was smiling affectionately at her too, and they were talking about something and laughing merrily with one another. As far as I could tell at a distance, things were going well.

Blending into the wall in a corner of the room, I let out a sigh of admiration. "He really is dashing, isn't he? I suppose I knew that from his portrait."

I shouldn't have spoken. My voice startled the waiter walking past at that moment so much that he almost dropped his tray.

My husband, standing beside me, wore an exasperated look. "There's no reason for you to suppress your presence here, is there? Just act normally."

"I'm not really conscious of it. This *is* normal for me. Speaking of which, could you step away from me slightly? If you're too close, the attention you draw spills onto me."

Though I tried to make some space between us, Lord Simeon fought back, putting an arm around me. As we engaged in our silly game of cat and mouse, a young man with light brown hair and blue eyes approached.

"Erm, Marielle?"

Pushing back Lord Simeon's face, which had gotten far too close to mine, I hurriedly greeted him. "Oh, good evening, Lord Lucio." I accidentally said it in Lagrangian, so I began again, switching to Lindenese. Remembering that we were in public, I used his official name as well. "How rude of me. I'm glad to see that you're in such good health, Prince Gracius. Good evening to you as well, Isaac."

Orta's crown prince, now being kept safe in Lagrange's care, nodded back at me. His face was far more composed and cheerful than it had been when we first met.

"Good to see you again. You two are as close as ever, I see. When the Vice Captain is with you, it's like he's a totally different person."

I looked over my shoulder at the bespectacled man standing behind me, and we exchanged an awkward laugh. Then Lord Simeon cleared his throat and adopted a neutral expression. No doubt he encountered Prince Gracius quite often in his role as a royal guard. *So much for the serious persona he's worked so hard to portray.*

"I see you've started to attend functions like this," I said.

"Well, I can't stay cooped up forever. I'm not here to be a freeloader, but to learn everything I can. Plus I have to make connections. I can only do that with Isaac interpreting for me, of course. Still, the guest of honor tonight is the Lavian crown prince. I have to thank him for his help, don't I?"

Prince Gracius was the lone surviving heir to the Ortan royal family, which had been overthrown and driven out of the country in a coup d'état. That had left him in a difficult position ever since childhood. The military regime was continually making attempts on his life. They'd even attacked him on the journey to Lagrange, which had caused a great deal of trouble. We had been caught up in that chaos very recently. Lord Simeon and Prince Severin had personally gone to the scene to assist, and help was dispatched from Lavia as well.

Now that Prince Gracius had a chance to meet Prince Liberto of Lavia, it was only natural that he wanted to express his gratitude. However, the man who'd actually put his life on the line was nowhere to be seen. He was a specialist in working behind the scenes and wouldn't reveal himself at an event like this.

"Have you spoken to the prince yet?" I asked.

"No, not yet. He has quite a crowd around him, and I'm bad at that kind of thing. Have you?"

"No. I was thinking of approaching him when the fervor dies down a little. Why don't we go over there together?"

"That would be terrific. You'd give me the courage I need."

Prince Liberto and Princess Henriette still looked busy. As the rest of us chattered about recent events while waiting for a good opportunity, the air around us changed all of a sudden. In a flash, Lord Simeon was standing at

attention. I turned to look, wondering if Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto had come to us, but it was someone even more important.

“Good day, Marielle. I haven’t seen you since the summer, have I?” a calm and dignified voice greeted me.

I hurriedly pulled myself together, then gave a deep curtsy. “It has indeed been quite some time. I am pleased beyond measure to see you looking as magnificent as ever, Your Majesty. Allow me to express my congratulations on this auspicious day for your daughter.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you’re doing well too.”

I hadn’t seen the queen for several months. Her dress was deep green with embroidery of pure white silk thread, and though the base color was plain, the needlecraft was so masterful that it could only be called a work of art. The floral pattern extended from the waist all the way to the long, trailing hem of her skirt. It had a grandeur befitting her status, yet it was subdued enough so as not to be ostentatious. It struck exactly the right balance for tonight’s event, of which she was a host but not the main focus.

Such perfection was to be expected from the woman who stood above all other noblewomen. From her dress to her hairstyle to her accessories, every detail was perfection. A true noblewoman doesn’t only consider her own appearance, but the occasion as well. I could see my best friend in the distance, nestling close to the crown prince, and wished her the best in the tough challenge of being the queen’s successor.

The two guests of honor received plenty of attention, of course, but many guests were watching the queen as well. For her to go out of her way to speak to me in this far corner was a greater honor than I deserved, and I was painfully conscious of all the eyes that had fallen on me. Still, Her Majesty had addressed me specifically, so I couldn’t hide behind my husband. *Eek, I can feel my odds of survival dropping!*

She continued, “I was hoping to have a nice chat with you once your wound had healed, but I was busy with one thing or another and never quite had the chance. You’ve been through rather a lot as well, no? What with the lieutenant colonel being gravely wounded.”

“Thank you for your concern,” I murmured.

I found myself smiling awkwardly, unsure of how to respond. Admittedly, from summer on, we’d had no shortage of bloodshed. After I’d recovered, Lord Simeon had been shot and broken a few ribs. He’d been in very bad shape, and although he was standing there now as though nothing was wrong, he was only just fully healed. I suspected our lives had more ups and downs than that of the average noble couple.

“There was something I meant to ask you now that things have calmed down. Perhaps you’ve already heard about it from the lieutenant colonel?”

“Oh, well...”

I stole a glance at Lord Simeon. A hint of unease appeared in the light blue eyes behind his glasses. “Is this about her working for you?” he asked.

The queen nodded. “Yes. Last time there was an ulterior motive, but I would definitely like for Marielle to become my lady-in-waiting officially now. What would you say to that?”

Her Majesty had cut straight to the point, skipping any further pleasantries. I reflexively gulped.

This had come up in passing before, but I’d heard absolutely nothing since then, so I’d hoped the idea had been quietly abandoned. That was apparently not the case. For a brief period this summer, I had served as Her Majesty’s lady-in-waiting—but only for show. As she had mentioned, there had been a different purpose behind it, and I hadn’t really fulfilled the role at all. How could she be so taken with me when I’d been little more than a useless guest?

What value does she see in me? Is it my foreign language skills? The fact that I’m a member of House Flaubert? It can’t be my ability to suppress my presence and blend into the background, can it? Oh, or perhaps she actually wants that sort of a stealthy lady-in-waiting? I am rather proud of my intelligence-gathering skills. If she needs me in that capacity, I should prove useful.

Of the lines of work considered suitable for ladies, this was the most prestigious of all. It would be of benefit to my house—even if it was far beyond my station for the queen to ask me personally. Still, I wanted to be at home.

Working in the palace was fine for a short period, but I couldn't keep doing it forever. I'd have no time to write.

At the best of times, I had quite a number of duties at home. Now that I had married into the Flaubert family, I couldn't simply do as I pleased every day. The lady of the house had social obligations and was in charge of hiring and supervising the servants. On that front and others, I still had a great deal to learn from my mother-in-law. With all of the conflicts and other incidents that kept cropping up around us, my writing time had already been drastically reduced. I didn't want it to diminish it further.

Moreover, taking this job would mean being separated from Lord Simeon. Though we'd both be working at the palace, it would be in different places. Last time, even if our paths crossed, we weren't free to act ourselves during working hours. Not getting to have so much as a proper conversation had made me miss him so much. I'd been able to withstand it for a while due to the particular circumstances, but I couldn't possibly cope with it permanently.

I racked my brain trying to think of how I could possibly decline Her Majesty without being rude. Lord Simeon was a rare sight as well. For once, he looked lost as to what to do.

Seeing both of us struggling, aware that we couldn't straightforwardly turn down a request from the queen herself, Her Majesty added, "I don't mind if you commute to the palace rather than staying here. It needn't be every day either. I wouldn't want to force a newlywed couple to live apart, and I know you must have responsibilities as the future mistress of an earldom. I've no doubt your family would resent it if I swallowed up *all* of your time. Half of the month or so would be perfectly sufficient."

Oh no, she's going to such great lengths to compromise! What a truly unprecedented proposal! Surely there's no way I'm allowed to refuse now... My word, though! I'm not the kind of woman who has half her time to give away every month! That would be a serious problem for me! My smile frozen in place, I turned the predicament over and over in my mind, desperate to find an answer.

Then, with a hesitant air, Lord Simeon spoke up. "This offer is an honor in all

senses of the word, but my wife isn't one to enjoy spending so much time outside the home."

Yes! That's exactly it! I'm a writer; we're housebound creatures by nature! I don't mind leaving for research purposes—I'd go anywhere for that—but on a fundamental level, I prefer staying home.

"If that's so, she's remarkably active. During the social season, she shows her face here, there, and everywhere. In the palace, she freely talks to whomever without shying away a smidgen. When you were under suspicion of breach of trust, she even had the courage to involve herself and complain directly to the crown prince entirely of her own accord."

Naturally, Her Majesty has been thorough in her research! It's all true; I can hardly deny it.

Haltingly, Lord Simeon replied, "She was forced by circumstance."

"Would it not be better to say she's capable of doing anything should the need arise? Her ability to take decisive action is a point in her favor, in my view."

"Your kind words are appreciated, Your Majesty," came my husband's reply after a few moments. He had boldly turned down her insistent request despite her status, but he'd now reached an insurmountable impasse. He glanced my way, his eyes saying that I had no one to blame for this mess but myself.

I'm so sorry! You're absolutely right! But have my actions really been all that bad?! I should say not...probably. Didn't Her Majesty herself just praise my character and my ability to take decisive action? That itself is such an honor that it makes finding a pretext to refuse all the harder.

"She has even forged a connection with Prince Gracius. They appear to be on very good terms. I imagine that if Marielle were to spend more time here at the palace, he would find it a great comfort."

The prince in question, who had been listening to Isaac interpreting our conversation, flashed a noncommittal smile. Clearly, he'd sensed that we were trying to refuse and having some difficulty. Even though backing the queen would have been the advantageous choice for him, he was kind enough to stay

neutral for the time being.

What are we going to do? Perhaps I could accept if she'd be willing to make a few more concessions... Honestly, though, I'd still rather avoid it. Working as a lady-in-waiting would be pleasant enough, but I simply cannot bear to lose the time.

The most frustrating part was that I couldn't confess the actual reason for my hesitation. Telling her that I was an author and needed time to write would explain everything, but I couldn't admit to such a thing—not here, and certainly not to Her Majesty the Queen.

Making up my mind to refuse her no matter what, I began, "Well, I—"

Yet I found myself interrupted by a young woman's voice. "Mother, do refrain from putting my friend in such an unbearable quandary."

Reflexively turning my head, I laid eyes on a red dress decorated with gold thread and pearls. It adorned Princess Henriette, who had walked over accompanied by Prince Liberto.

"Marielle isn't the sort to live a dull everyday life confined in a box. She wouldn't at all be suited to boring day-to-day work at the palace."

"Boring?" the queen replied. "That's rather rude to the staff who dedicate themselves to their strenuous labor."

"My apologies. I mean no disrespect to them or their work. However, Marielle thrives when behaving in ways others don't expect. She does not fit within standard rules and rationality."

Despite being chided, the princess was relentlessly arguing my case. *At least, I hope that's what she's doing. Personally, I don't see anything irrational about my behavior!*

Just then, another voice contributed. "I must protest as well, Your Majesty. Whatever she does, she has disasters and key figures buzzing around her like flies. If you have her work at the palace, the stress of it all will send Simeon to an early grave—and I'd be caught in the crossfire, of course. With every fiber of my being, I insist that you please drop this business of making her your lady-in-waiting."

His Highness had arrived as well, and it was reassuring to have him on my side—even if his argument left something to be desired!

“Caught in the crossfire?” I murmured, ready to object. Lord Simeon immediately shushed me by putting his large hand over my mouth. As I squirmed to get free, Julianne gestured from behind His Highness, indicating that I should be quiet.

Both of you are so mean! Don't forget that when I worked at the palace before, it was to help you two! True, things took a horrible turn, but in no way was that my fault. It was sheer coincidence! No more and no less!

Sulking and unable to express it with Lord Simeon's hand over me, I was decidedly less than thrilled with those who were supposedly coming to my defense. Then I happened to meet the gaze of the man standing next to Princess Henriette. The pale eyes on his kindly face beheld me with amusement. Unwittingly forgetting about my sour mood, I stared back, and he responded with a smile so delicately beautiful that I could have mistaken him for a woman.

His hair, which framed his soft features, was a little too brown to be called blond. It was what they termed flaxen, I supposed. Its length, down to his shoulders, gave him even more of an androgynous appearance. He had the slight sort of frame you'd expect from a young nobleman, and he was only half a head taller than Princess Henriette. Without her high-heeled shoes, there might have been a more pronounced difference, but it would have been one head at most. As rude as it seemed, I couldn't help thinking that if he donned a dress, no one would bat an eye.

Having seen portraits and photographs of him, I was surprised at how different an impression he made in the flesh. I'd freely imagined someone taller, a little more burly and masculine. In part this was likely because I had spent so much time around such men, but the fact that he was Lutin's master surely played a role as well.

Lutin the mysterious thief was known as a villain who'd purloined all sorts of treasures from the nobility and the wealthy, sneering at the tight security of their manors. Yet in truth, he was a Lavian spy. While attracting every eye with his grand heists, he worked in the shadows to gather confidential intelligence

on other countries. He had caused me quite some consternation, but he had also helped me out on more than one occasion. When Prince Gracius had been targeted by assassins, for example, Lutin had been secretly dispatched to help protect him.

After getting close enough to Lutin to learn a few things about him, I had come to understand that he reported directly to Prince Liberto. The difficult spy who always behaved in his own idiosyncratic way obeyed only one man—and that man was now standing before me. With this information, my mind had concocted a specific image. Surely Lutin’s master had to be even stronger, even cleverer than his subordinate, I had assumed.

Yet in person, the prince appeared gentle and kind in a way that suggested no resemblance to the sharp-tongued thief whatsoever. I had heard he was twenty-six years old, but he looked a little younger. I saw nothing in the way of brutish brawn or quick-witted sharpness—only fine features and a gentle nature. More than a prince, he reminded me of a fairy or an angel. It was a puzzle to imagine him giving orders to a rogue like Lutin.

As I did nothing but stare without meaning to, the conversation continued without me. Now that both her oldest and youngest child had raised objections, the queen closed her fan with a snap.

“You’ve made your cases perfectly clear, but I would like to hear from Marielle now. She shall be the one to decide. I acknowledge that the lieutenant colonel has the right to put in a word as her husband, but shouldn’t we let the lady in question speak for herself first?”

Struck by her dark gaze, Lord Simeon paused for a moment, then released me with a breath. Now I was free to give a response. All eyes fell on me.

“Well, Marielle?”

“Well... You see...” I said falteringly.

Steadying myself, I drafted an answer in my mind. When I surreptitiously clutched at the hem of Lord Simeon’s jacket, he lowered his hand and rested it on mine. Even though he said nothing, the warmth of his gentle grasp encouraged and reassured me. With the specter of unease banished ever so slightly, I quietly began.

“Serving you would be an indescribable privilege, Your Majesty, and the honor of you asking me personally makes me happy beyond words. However, I’m afraid I would prefer to stay at home. I’m terribly sorry.” Watching Lord Simeon and Prince Severin’s reactions to make certain I wasn’t being disrespectful, I continued. “Attending you was an invaluable experience, and I learned so very much. I’d have no objection to serving you again; however, my life is already filled with obligations. You kindly mentioned that it needn’t be every day, but as it is, I feel as though I don’t have enough hours in the day at home. I realize it might seem self-important to refuse such an offer, but I can only humbly beg your forgiveness.”

“I see,” the queen replied after a moment. From the tone of the discussion so far, she couldn’t have been overly surprised by my response. She smiled regretfully. “Oh well. It feels like a waste to leave you and your skills cloistered away like that, but I cannot ignore your own wishes and force you into it. I shall speak no more of it.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. I am deeply sorry that I was unable to meet your expectations.”

Lowering my head, I apologized as profusely as I could manage. She was a fair and wise queen; I’d been confident that if I was honest with her, she would accept it. I already knew her character, so I was respectful but not evasive. After all, I merely wanted to preserve my free time at all costs. I still felt like it was a shame, however, so there was no insincerity in my apology.

The relief from Lord Simeon was palpable, and Prince Severin blatantly patted his chest as well. *Did he really think I would bring disaster raining down on the palace? How rude. I’m a plain and mild-mannered individual, I’ll have you know.*

“What is everyone doing over here?” asked another new arrival. “The guests you’re ignoring will feel rather put out.”

Just as I’d caught my breath, His Majesty himself had appeared! I jumped with a start. Almost the entire royal family had gathered in this one corner of the room. *If Duke Silvestre turns up as well, I give up! I’ll have to run away!*

“You can’t only talk to the young folk. Other guests require your attention as well. Don’t leave them waiting too long.”

I was worried about what was coming next, but it seemed he'd only come to fetch the queen. His eyes briefly wandered my way, but he didn't actually talk to me. His momentary gaze held a teasing hint that he knew everything. Soon, though, he was gone without another word, ushering Her Majesty away with him. Once the king and queen returned to the party, I heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Smiling, Princess Henriette said, "Sorry about that, Marielle. Mother seems exceptionally fond of you. I told her you would never agree, but clearly she refused to accept that."

The smile I returned was a rueful one now that the tension had finally dispersed. "It did pain me to decline her. Being asked really was an honor, and one I'm glad to have received. I doubt I would have been much use to her, though."

"I wouldn't be so sure. You were the one who uncovered the motive in the poisoning case, no? That led directly to the arrest. I hear you've played a key role in other incidents as well. Just recently, you located the missing crown."

Prince Gracius nodded at me. "That's right," he said with a smile.

I hardly found it on my own. That was all thanks to Lord Simeon.

"You have a quick mind, an exceptional memory, and remarkable language skills. You speak five, don't you? As much as languages are a necessary part of a cultivated education, polyglots like you are exceptional. If you would ever agree to it, I'd gladly have you as my personal attendant as well."

I struggled to form a response. "I appreciate you being so nice to me, but it's honestly making me uncomfortable. Couldn't you insult me a little as well?"

"Insult you? What sort of a ridiculous request is that?"

"Oh, yes, that's the spirit. Could you be a tad meaner, though?"

"Don't draw me into your strange little world!"

As soon as the princess raised her voice, Prince Liberto, standing behind her, burst into gentle laughter.

She turned around in a panic and once again took her place beside him. "Oh!

I'm sorry. We're rather close, so I got lost in the moment."

I hurriedly curtsied as well. "My apologies. I should have introduced myself and offered my congratulations, but instead I've been nothing but rude. Welcome to Lagrange. My name is Marielle Flaubert."

Lord Simeon likewise offered his apologies. "Indeed, this is Marielle, my wife. It was rude of us to cause such a fuss in your presence. Allow us both to offer our congratulations on your engagement."

The prince calmly returned the sentiment. "Thank you very much. After meeting you, Vice Captain, I've been quite eager to meet your wife. The princess has told me a great deal about your exploits in her letters."

He spoke fluent Lagrangian with barely a hint of a foreign accent, and his voice was every bit as gentle as his appearance. Listening to his dulcet tone, I felt almost like I was listening to a lullaby. This, too, was markedly different from what I had imagined. I had expected either a clear and commanding voice or a merry and jovial one. Given the circumstances, he was probably concealing his true nature to a certain extent, but he truly came across as Lutin's complete opposite.

"I've heard a great deal about you from Princess Henriette as well, Your Highness," I replied. "She talks about you whenever we meet, so I almost feel as though I've been in correspondence with you myself."

"Oh, really?" He turned to the princess, whose cheeks flushed.

She rushed to explain. "Not excessively, of course. I do talk about you once in a while, if a letter has recently arrived."

"Poppycock," Prince Severin interjected in a low murmur. "You go on about him from morning till night, repeating the same details if it pleases you. I got sick of hearing it myself."

"Don't exaggerate! When was the last time you spent a whole day with me from morning till night? You run off almost immediately!"

"Of course I do. How could I stand listening to you bleating on about your sweetheart for hours on end? I have Julianne these days, but when I was single, you wouldn't believe how maddening it was to hear about every single letter

and gift.”

“That’s nothing to do with me! You let your feelings color your view of the entire world. Don’t you think I got sick of seeing you act as though you were carrying all mankind’s misery on your shoulders just because you had a string of failed romances?”

“You always have a fine riposte, don’t you? I only hope it doesn’t send your prince packing!”

This heartwarming sibling argument made Prince Liberto burst out laughing again. It lasted a bit longer this time, causing the princess’s face to redden even more.

“No, well, you see... I’m not like that, not really. I don’t argue with everyone.”

His turquoise eyes still glinted with mirth as he beheld her. Putting a hand to his mouth, which looked ready to chortle again at any moment, he said, “You’re quite adorable.”

Honeyed words from a beautiful man... It went without saying that Princess Henriette turned as red as a lobster, at a loss for a response. However, watching from the sidelines, I very briefly picked up on something else.

What was that?

Though I was trying to keep my eyes moving, knowing that it would be rude to stare too intently, I found my scrutinizing gaze fixed on the prince. There was nothing out of the ordinary—was there? He was still smiling warmly at his fiancée. They looked like such a happy couple that you wouldn’t have guessed it was an arranged union. And yet, when he happened to glance my way, our eyes met and I again felt something as I forcibly maintained my own smile.

I looked to Julianne, who was standing quietly next to Prince Severin. She noticed and returned my gaze. She had been my best friend since birth, so we could communicate using only our eyes. It didn’t show on our faces, but what we wanted to say came through clear as day.

“You felt that too, didn’t you?!”

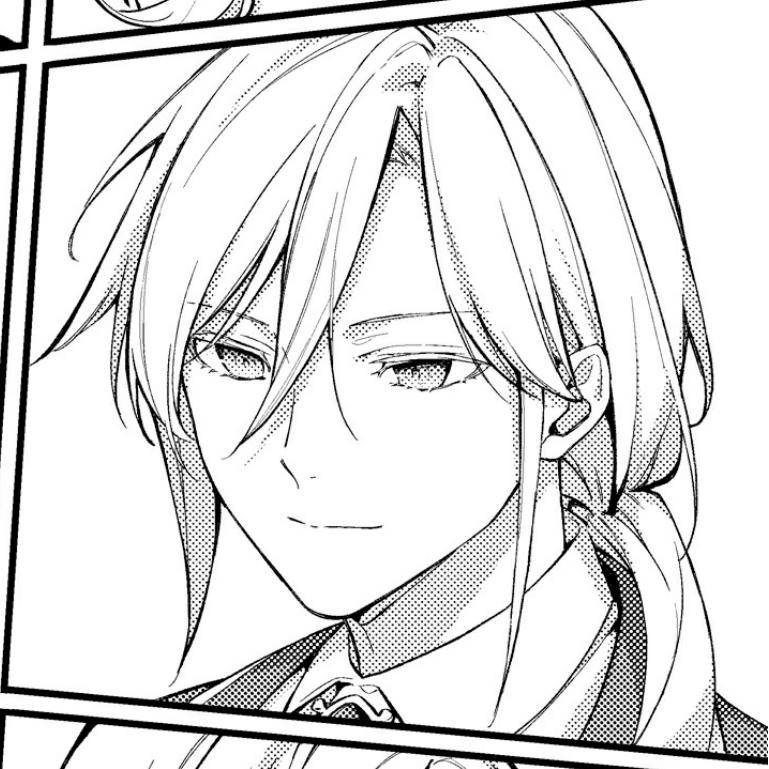
“I did! I knew I wasn’t imagining it!”

“Something the matter?” asked Lord Simeon, noticing something going on between us.

“No, nothing at all,” I insisted and opened my fan. Concealing our expressions in ladylike fashion, Julianne and I continued our wordless dialogue.

“It was there!” she indicated. *“A flare I couldn’t ignore, just for an instant!”*

“There’s no doubt about it. My intuition has a nearly flawless track record—forty-seven wins and only three losses!”



“I’m certain I’m not mistaken either. My senses have been honed to a fine point by my princess training!”

“I can’t believe it. Could the prince be...”

“Wait, we’re missing a crucial piece of information. We don’t know which type he is.”

“Julianne?”

She played off her fiancé’s perturbed inquiry with a giggle, saying, “My, you two gentlemen seem rather vexed.”

Indeed, I could feel Lord Simeon’s glare growing hotter by the second, but I had no time to worry about that now.

“‘Which type’? Isn’t that obvious?”

“What are you talking about? Aren’t you a writer? There are so many possibilities!”

“Hmm. I suppose we need to dig deeper.”

“Let’s meet up later for a proper discussion.”

While we stood there in silence, Prince Liberto had begun a conversation with Prince Gracius. The former’s Lindenese was perfect as well; they could talk freely without any need for an interpreter. Prince Liberto undoubtedly spoke Easdalian as well, and this had me wondering if he also spoke the languages of Vissel, Orta, and even Slavia. This casually capable man was setting off my excitement more and more by the second. The fist I held behind my fan clenched even tighter.

“Marielle, you look rather fatigued,” my husband remarked. “Why don’t you go and take a breather?”

“No need. I’m feeling ready for anything. Overflowing with energy, even.”

“Your choice of words tells me all I need to know. I bid you remember where we are.”

“Trust the Demon Vice Captain to notice such subtleties. Don’t worry. You’re the only man for me.”

“That’s not what I was getting at—though there is that as well!”

While quietly doing battle with Lord Simeon, I kept my gaze focused on the dashing foreign prince. It had been a long time since I last felt this way, so I wanted to fully dedicate myself to the thrill of observing someone so exceptional.

You see it in stories all the time, don’t you? The kind, unassuming people are exactly the ones hiding more beneath the surface. It’s a golden rule.

The prince was still admiring his blushing fiancée, but the momentary flash in his eyes was reminiscent of the master thief. A teasing glint. The look of someone who loved poking fun at people. He’d given us a peek at his true nature, which was not as it appeared on the surface.

It made sense now. Too much sense. The two men had seemed so strangely unlike at first, but now the link was clear. Prince Liberto was, without a doubt, Lutin’s master.

Chapter Four

As I had told the queen, I was a busy woman. The new royal couple was on my mind, but my priority was my writing. The day after the party, I went to our secret hideaway for a meeting with Mr. Satie. By now, my draft had been through several rounds of revisions and reached a stage where, provided the final check turned up no issues, the printing process could get underway. As I sighed, relieved that I could finally take a breather, Mr. Satie inquired about something that took me by surprise.

“My next work? We’ve only just finished this one. It’s a little soon, isn’t it?”

“I don’t mean with us. I was asked to act as an intermediary because they didn’t know how else to contact you. You have a request from a newspaper.”

“A newspaper?”

“Don’t worry. It isn’t *La Môme*.”

Mr. Satie tucked my manuscript into an envelope, then stood from his chair and closed the window, remarking that it had gotten cold. From the apartment building’s top floor, we had a good view of the sky. The weather was wonderfully clear in Sans-Terre today, but the wind was a tad too brisk.

After taking his seat again, Mr. Satie reiterated that the paper in question was not any of the gossip rags that had been causing us such difficulty lately. He then opened a work notebook and placed the business card he’d been given on the table in front of me. It was not handwritten, but a professionally printed one, and it bore the title of editor-in-chief.

“‘Chersie,’” I read. “Wait—*Chersie*?!”

My tone took a sudden turn as the company name registered. I checked several times to make sure my eyes weren’t deceiving me. They were not. The card was lettered with the name of a major newspaper so well known that everyone in Sans-Terre had heard of it. Even nobles read this high-quality broadsheet. Admittedly, it had the shortest history of all papers that could

make that claim, but it was still in a different league altogether from any gossip rag. It was a serious, straitlaced newspaper that never printed any frivolous nonsense.

“There must be some mistake. A gossip rag might want to drum up interest with some silly story, but what does *Chersie* want with my writing? It beggars belief.”

“I was surprised too, so I asked if they were quite certain, and it seemed they were. They want you—Agnès Vivier—to write an original serialized story.”

“My word.”

All I could do was stare at the small card, stunned. My shock exceeded my joy. A classy newspaper, the sort that thumbed its nose at female authors, wanted my writing. What was going on?

“Are you sure it isn’t a reporter from *La Môme* trying to catch me in a trap? This business card could be a forgery.” I picked it up and scrutinized both sides.

Laughing, Mr. Satie replied, “You’re surprisingly cautious. That’s not a bad thing, but it’s not necessary in this case. I’ve known reporters from *Chersie* before, so I can vouch for the authenticity of the card. I suppose you could make one that looked like the real thing if you really tried, but *Chersie* wouldn’t look too kindly on it if they found out, and few people would dare act so thoughtlessly as to risk being sued by a large company. Besides, this Berger fellow was a fine gentleman.”

“The editor-in-chief came to meet you in person?”

Mr. Satie used to work for a major publisher, and his experience and connections from back then were valuable to his current career. If he said the card was legitimate, I felt I could trust him.

“Yes. He only took up the position this year, so he said he wanted to come and introduce himself. Why he’d need to introduce himself to us, I have no idea. Maybe he just wanted to see for himself what a publishing house for women’s fiction looked like on the inside.”

“What was your impression of him?”

“Just turned forty, which is young for an editor-in-chief. Nothing about him put me off. He didn’t have the arrogance that people from major players tend to—he came to have an honest chat. He’s dissatisfied with the content of the paper, feeling that broadsheets’ obsession with tradition and social graces is boring. Now that he’s in charge, he’s diving head first into changing all that.”

“Goodness.”

No wonder *Chersie* had changed of late. They never printed any idle gossip, of course, but it most certainly covered a wider variety of content than before. There were family columns clearly aimed at women that I myself enjoyed reading. Some said the paper had grown shallow and frivolous, but on the whole, the reaction had been positive.

“*Chersie* has more flexibility than the other papers because it’s so much newer,” Mr. Satie continued. “Apparently, even the higher-ups admit sales will stagnate if they stick to a conservative approach as times change.”

These days, they were aiming for a wider readership than just upper-class men. While holding on to the prestige of a broadsheet, they were searching for a way to become a different kind of newspaper. As part of this transformation, they wanted to print a story by a female author, apparently. That made sense once I heard it explained, but my initial shock had yet to subside.

“It’s certainly a daring idea,” I said. “I suspect there will be backlash from the male readership.”

“Probably, but they’re comfortable with that. In the end, women make up half the population. From a business standpoint, ignoring them is unwise. I admire Mr. Berger’s audacity.” This was coming from Mr. Satie, who had successfully blazed a trail in the field of published works for women. His experience gave his words great weight. “It’s up to you whether you go for it, but personally I don’t see any reason not to. If you do, I’ll support you all the way. More awareness of my company will mean more profits for me as well.”

“Hmm.”

I spent a moment lost in thought. I had only ever intended to work with Satie Publishing, but this was an appealing offer. I’d enjoyed serialized books in newspapers ever since I was a child, especially thrilling mystery stories. How

could I resist a book of my own being read that way?

“Do you think I can do it?” I finally asked.

“He apparently selected Agnès Vivier after reading books by many different authors. If he hadn’t found an author that met his standards, I suspect he’d have shelved the whole project. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Mr. Berger, a man, had chosen my books specifically. Another man, Mr. Satie, had supported me all along. Lord Simeon, too, had praised my skill at characterization. Not every man simply dismissed my writing out of hand. Plus, women read newspapers as well. My work would reach the eyes of those who’d never touched any of my books before.

Can I write this? I want to write it. I want people to read it!

I looked up from the business card. “Would I be able to meet Mr. Berger myself and talk to him?”

Mr. Satie smiled broadly. “He said he would love that. I can even take you there right now if you want.”

Life is full of surprises. I’d been keenly reminded of that many times. Surprise and joy can come out of nowhere, as they had when I met Lord Simeon.

After going straight to the *Chersie* office and meeting with Mr. Berger, I accepted the offer. Initially, there would be a trial serialization of twenty parts. Since the paper was not published every day, that equated to a run of roughly one month. Each part would measure a quarter of a page, which meant a very small amount of text. Altogether, it wouldn’t add up to a full novel; it would be closer to a short story. Purely in terms of volume, it was an amount I could write in a day. The problem was *what* to write.

Groaning to myself, I walked several full circuits of House Flaubert’s expansive gardens. I’d started planning my concept when I accepted the offer, but an entire day later, I still hadn’t made any real progress.

My cat walked up to me, following in my footsteps, but then spotted an insect and immediately chased after it. The breeze was cool on this late autumn afternoon; I adjusted my heavy shawl and wrapped it more tightly around my shoulders.

Idly watching my cat leap into the air on the other side of a flower bed, I thought as hard as I could. This was the first time I'd ever been so troubled over what to write. The short length didn't make it easier; on the contrary, it's much harder to craft an exciting story with a satisfying conclusion with less time to tell it. Also, it was to be published not in a book or even a magazine, but a newspaper. It would draw the eye of more than just Agnès Vivier's fans—men and women, young and old alike. If I wrote something along the lines of my existing work, it would appeal to only a small portion of them.

Taking into account that men and older people will read it, perhaps it would be better to write something with a historical or mystery bent? Writing historical fiction might be somewhat difficult, though. I don't have an attachment to any particular era, so my knowledge is only surface level. If I start researching now, I won't finish the story in time. Oh, but what if I wrote about pirates—about Captain d'Indy? I've been to Enciel Island, where he was active, and I've even met his descendant. The pirate hideout was still there and everything. It was so interesting. I'd gladly write about that anytime.

I realized, however, I was still underprepared to write that. I would have to go back to Enciel Island and research thoroughly.

Once again, I groaned to myself. Going for a walk normally helped when I had writer's block. The stimulation of moving around or some scenery that caught my eye usually gave me inspiration. In hopes of that, I'd now been walking for about thirty minutes—but I hadn't come up with one compelling idea.

In one corner of the garden stood a swing. It wasn't a makeshift construction with ropes hanging from a tree, but a proper metal frame with chains. Nowadays it was only for decoration, but the brothers must have played on it as children. I wiped the fallen leaves off its seat and gently sat down. Swinging back and forth ever so slightly, I gazed at the roses growing nearby. The small flowers, close to the original species, bloomed well into autumn. Even now, with winter nearly upon us, they were still holding on, their dainty shape belying their hardy nature.

An inner nature quite unlike their surface appearance... Just like a certain prince I met recently.

A beautiful, kind prince whose true nature struck a sharp contrast. That actually sounded like a promising concept. Only this time I couldn't write purely about whatever made my fangirl flame blaze brightest. I also hadn't seen him at all since the welcome party. Not that he was a particularly outgoing person in general, I understood.

As I let my mind wander, unable to come up with an idea that satisfied me, Lord Simeon approached.

"There you are," he called.

He had the day off from the Royal Order of Knights, so he'd been sequestered away in his study since morning dealing with business tasks. It made me want to have a conversation with him about the meaning of the term "day off."

"Are you taking a break as well?" I asked him. "I congratulate you for finally realizing your body needs rest sometimes."

He came to a stop next to me, speaking in a somewhat exasperated tone. "I've finished my work already. I came to look for you because you still hadn't returned." He put a hand on the chain of the swing, so I put my feet on the ground to stop myself from moving.

"You can't have been working very long then," I said.

He paused a moment. "Next time, take a watch with you. It's been two hours since you went out."

"What? Really?"

I was sure it had only been thirty minutes. To find out it had been four times that long was quite a shock. Had I been so deep in thought that I'd lost all sense of time?

Lord Simeon touched my cheek, then frowned. I drew my shawl even closer around me to keep my neck warm.

"You're freezing. I know you insist you never catch a cold, but you'll soon have a fever at this rate. What have you been doing for two hours?"

"Nothing. Just walking around. I still haven't settled on a direction."

His large, ungloved hands wrapped around me from both sides. All at once, I

felt the incomparable comfort of his body heat and the hardness of his trained arms. If I knew anyone whose appearance truly belied their nature, it was this man. He had aristocratic good looks and a smile that gave him an air of roguishness. At first glance, one would take him for a brutal, blackhearted military officer who'd look perfect with a riding crop in his hand. Only, behind all that, he was a stubborn, overly serious, occasionally awkward, and adorable man. Who would have expected that? He was a black mark—one of my three losses against forty-seven wins—on my nearly perfect track record of studying the people of high society.

I didn't count people like Lutin and the Silver Fox who were experts in the art of deceit. They were complex special cases—too much for casual score-keeping. Besides, there had been moments with both of them when I'd suspected something awry.

"For the newspaper story?" Lord Simeon asked.

I sighed and nodded. "Yes. I don't think I should write something along the lines of my existing work, but that leaves me very unsure of what I *should* write. The love stories I always write wouldn't hold much appeal for men, would they?"

"That's surely a matter of personal taste, but I suppose there are ways in which stories that bring joy to women feel slightly unrealistic to men."

"Exactly."

The opposite was also true. At the end of the day, men and women demanded different types of stories. That was why I wished to rule out anything that focused too closely on the passions of one gender or the other and aim for something with widespread appeal. Sadly, that left me lost and frustrated.

I sighed several times. Lord Simeon let go of me, then offered me his hands as if urging me to stand. Accepting them, I did so. The swing creaked as if complaining at now being empty.

"If you keep stewing on it when you're stuck, it will only leave you more deeply entangled. Better to give your mind a break and enjoy a change of pace. Now that I have a day off, why don't we spend some time together?"

“You were the one who chased me away. Are you sure you don’t have any more pressing tasks?”

“Quite certain. I’ve taken care of everything urgent. I was thinking we could go out this evening.”

He pulled a long, thin envelope out of his pocket. It couldn’t have been a letter—it had neither the sender’s name and address nor the recipient’s, and it wasn’t sealed. I took it and opened it with a rising sense of hope. As suspected, I didn’t find notepaper inside, but theater tickets.

After looking at them for a moment, I said, “If you’re going to arrange something like this, I do wish you’d tell me in advance. What would you have done if I was busy with something important?”

“I only ordered them today when I saw how troubled you were. I had to find somewhere that still had seats available, so that took precedence over the play itself, but I expect it will be to your taste.”

The tickets were not for the National Theater, but a famous private one. *If we’re talking about my taste, I would rather visit one of the small playhouses I frequented in my single days. For those, you can simply turn up unplanned.* Simeon would never have picked a place like that, however. His theater of choice even had seats reserved for especially prestigious patrons.

The performance was a light comedy. I had actually seen publicity for it and been slightly intrigued. *My word, sometimes he does such unbearably lovely things. He looks as though he’s fixated on work alone, but it turns out he’s been paying attention to my struggles after all. This is why I love him.*

“Thank you!”

I stood on tiptoe to put my arms around Lord Simeon’s neck. He immediately bent down for me, so I kissed his cheek. The faint look of dissatisfaction on his face made me realize he had been expecting a kiss on the lips. I pulled away for a moment to remove my glasses, then stretched up again. Even though I was the one kissing him, when our lips met, I was overpowered by Lord Simeon’s passion.

My husband sought me again and again, until finally, with a soft moan, I held

him at bay and moved back a little. “We don’t have much time to get ready before going out.”

After I’d spent two hours in the garden, it was tea time. We were in rather a rush now if we wanted to make it to the evening’s performance.

Though his expression said he still hadn’t had enough, he nodded. “That’s true. In this season, I’m sure we needn’t worry too much about society, though. Simple clothes should be fine.”

“Oh, men. It doesn’t work that way.”

I shook my head. The theater wasn’t a mere entertainment venue; it was a social meeting place. Even outside of the social season, nobles living in the capital went to see plays. If Lord Simeon and I were together, I wouldn’t be able to escape from politely greeting those we saw, and that meant my outfit had to be up to scratch to avoid embarrassment. Not to me, but to Lord Simeon. We didn’t need to stand out, but we did need to present ourselves in a manner that didn’t impinge on House Flaubert’s dignity.

“Chouchou! Chouchou, we’re going back inside!”

When I called the ball of fluff moving around in the distance, she obediently came back, her tail held high, satisfied that she’d played as much as she wanted. I picked up the cat, then went back inside and quickly got changed.

As we boarded the carriage, Lord Noel watched on with a sullen look. “It’s not fair! I want to go too. Take me with you next time.”

We promised to buy him a souvenir, but his request was a rather difficult one—a model ship. Since we wouldn’t have time to look around for that, he would have to be satisfied with some sweets for today.

As sunset approached, we set out on our way to the theater. This delightful surprise of an excursion temporarily made me forget about my worries. The theater, the Théâtre d’Art, was especially large compared to others in the private sphere. Its facade consisted of several arches, with statues of great figures in the worlds of music and drama to greet the arriving patrons. Craning my neck to look up, I could see an angel on the roof, its wings spread wide.

This magnificent building had come to be when the old theater burned down

and was rebuilt anew. Apparently, the neighborhood had been a varied one filled with stores and homes until about thirty years ago, when there was a great fire that burned it all to rubble and claimed many lives. It was a real tragedy. Afterward, the king in power at the time had ordered reconstruction projects. The area was redeveloped with one impressive new building built after another. This included both the National Theater and the Théâtre d'Art, which was restored with the aid of donations. It was now one of Sans-Terre's main attractions even though it was actually a very recent addition.

When we alighted from the carriage, the lamps outside were already lit. As I made my way to the entrance, nestling close to Lord Simeon, people all around shot glances our way. It was a familiar scenario, and tonight I could sympathize with the onlookers more than ever.

I know how you feel! All too well! At twilight, the border between reality and illusion grows hazier. The golden glow of the lamps and the building that echoes a bygone age give the scene even more of a wondrous air. Then, a tall, handsome, finely dressed young man enters the scene, walking with an aristocratic dignity. Why, it's as though we've walked onto the stage ourselves, right here! The curtain rises, with drama sure to unfold. Will the dashing, sharp-witted young man be the detective, or the mysterious figure operating behind the scenes? I think the latter would leave me fangirling harder! But Lord Simeon would have to be the detective chasing down the mysterious figure, I suppose. Either would be incredible, though! I wish I could see them both!

"Marielle, could you at least come back to reality long enough to get to the top of the stairs?"

"'Mysterious figure'... It has such a charming ring to it..."

"Personally, I don't hear any ringing. But what matters is that you look where you're going."

"An antihero could be an option too, once in a while. You're too pure on the inside to be a villain, though." I let out a whimper.

Thoroughly lost in my delusion, I tripped on the stairs. However, Lord Simeon had foreseen this, so he supported me firmly and prevented me from falling over. I tried to play it off with a high-pitched laugh. Lord Simeon merely sighed,

defeated.

Inside, the majesty of the theater was enough to overwhelm any visitor. Large columns supported the high vaulted ceiling, and numerous elaborate chandeliers glimmered above us. The huge marble staircase curved elegantly, swinging around from the left and right before converging at a landing and ascending further from there. It wasn't quite as grand as the palatial National Theater, but it was a fabulously beautiful place filled with highly artistic ornamentation.

On the floor around the staircase stood bronze statues posed in performance of a famous play. Surrounding those were displays of handwritten sheet music by celebrated composers, instruments with historical significance, and so on. It would have been exciting enough to come just to look at these. As I was trying to take it all in, I stopped in front of a painting hanging not far from the staircase.

"Cottinelli's Violet Lady..."

I'd never seen it before—it hadn't been here when I visited the theater previously. There was a sign with a brief description, which I read. All it said was that the work was by a Lavian painter, giving no indication that it depicted any particular theatrical work. It looked like an ordinary portrait.

"Is Cottinelli a famous artist?" I asked. Lord Simeon was more au fait with this kind of thing than I was.

Unsurprisingly, I received a prompt answer. "In some circles, he's better known as an unfortunate artist. He wasn't appreciated during his lifetime and passed away in his thirties. He made a living painting portraits on request, so this is likely to be one of those, I'd say."

Hmm, so it is just a portrait. Maybe rather than depicting a certain play, the lady is an actress? Now that I think about it, her face does look rather familiar.

The painting was of a woman in a white dress. She was beautiful, with brown hair and unusual purple eyes. A bountiful portion of her chest was exposed, and this was adorned with a striking necklace that appeared to be amethyst. There were seven of the large, deep purple stones all in a row, with small diamonds around them, also purple. Further purple droplets hung below that as well. The

jewels had probably been chosen to match her eyes, and the “Violet” in the title no doubt referred to both her and the necklace.

Amethysts not being overly valuable stones, I had a similar necklace myself. My mother had given it to me for my societal debut. Her mother had given it to her before that, the piece always being passed from one generation to the next.

“Based on the design of the dress, this must be from around thirty years ago,” I observed.

It wasn’t an especially old painting, but it had an old-fashioned quality to it nonetheless. Seemingly, it didn’t depict an actress who worked here.

“Yes, Cottinelli is a contemporary artist. If he hadn’t died so young, he would probably still be alive today.”

“Who is this woman, I wonder? It seems as though it’s not a well-known painting or one with any real historical value, and there’s no mention of the model or any particular play.”

I had returned to my original question. However, it wasn’t Lord Simeon who answered me.

“That’s a piece I only obtained recently, with no connection to the world of drama,” said a rich, resonant voice.

When I looked up, a well-dressed man was walking down the nearby staircase toward us. I estimated he was in his sixties. He had a pleasant air about him, with both a depth that came from age and a youthful sense of vigor. Around half of his light brown hair had grayed, though he still had a bountiful amount of it.

“Welcome, I’m so glad you’ve come. My name is Blanche, and I’m the manager here. It is truly an honor to receive a visit from members of the esteemed House Flaubert.”

When he reached us, he stopped and delivered a formal bow. *So he’s the Théâtre d’Art’s manager. He certainly has the sort of presence I’d expect.*

“It’s a pleasure to be here,” Lord Simeon replied, returning the greeting.

I did the same. “Thank you. It’s shaping up to be a wonderful evening

already.” Then, now that I had his attention, I decided to inquire further about the painting. “It’s interesting that you’ve hung this here if it doesn’t have any connection to the theater. Was there a particular reason?”

Mr. Blanche answered me with a warm smile. “No, I wouldn’t say so. I happened to see it at an auction the other day, so I bid on it and won. The model looks a bit like one of our actresses, so I was rather taken with it, I suppose.”

“Now that I think about it, her face does look familiar. Hmm, who does it resemble?”

I turned my eyes back to the painting. *An actress from the Théâtre d’Art who looks like the woman in this painting...* As I looked closely, it suddenly occurred to me.

“Oh, do you mean Grace?”

I matched the face in my memory to the one in front of me. They were indeed fairly similar. Grace was in her thirties, so she had a different sort of character, but if she were younger, she’d have looked very much like the woman in the painting. Even the hair was a very similar shade of brown.

“I see you’re well acquainted with our troupe! What a delight. Yes, you’re absolutely right. The subject of this painting is the spitting image of Grace when she was in her twenties.”

Mr. Blanche gazed at the painting as if looking into the past. It was not the expression of a man simply regarding an actress who worked for him. Then I remembered—Grace’s full name was Grace Blanche. I’d heard before that she was the manager’s daughter. Now that I knew Mr. Blanche was looking at the painting and seeing his own daughter, it made perfect sense.

A vague sense of doubt lingered in my mind, however. That still didn’t explain why he’d hung it so prominently. It wasn’t as though Grace was the company’s most popular actress. Was he merely a doting father, clouded by his love for her? I’d heard that the Théâtre d’Art avoided that sort of favoritism.

While I was pondering this, Mr. Blanche said something quite surprising. “Sadly, not too many visitors have stopped and looked at it, but actually, the

Lavian prince asked me the same question. I believe the painting caught his eye because the artist is from Lavia as well.”

“Prince Liberto is here?”

“Yes, he just arrived. He really is as fine-looking as the rumors described. I must say, I’m grateful to have so many high-ranking visitors this evening, but it does make me nervous as well.”

Mr. Blanche laughed without a hint of boastfulness. I exchanged a brief glance with Lord Simeon. If Prince Liberto was here, he couldn’t possibly have come alone. In all likelihood, Princess Henriette was with him. Did that mean they were here on a date?

I wonder if they’re forging a deeper connection. It would be lovely if they are. It would have been ideal to watch from afar rather than interrupt their evening, but now that our paths had crossed, we couldn’t simply pretend they hadn’t. My husband and I nodded to each other; we both knew we should say hello to them later.

Following that, we left Mr. Blanche and went to find our seats.

The seats Lord Simeon had booked for us were situated in a horseshoe-shaped box right at the front. Theater seats varied in price significantly, becoming cheaper the higher up from the stage you went. Those closest to the ceiling—the nosebleeds—were sold for a very low price indeed, and could be occupied even by guests dressed in plain, everyday clothing. One of the unique and interesting characteristics of the world of theater was that royals and commoners could all come to be entertained in the same room.

Our seats were on the lowest balcony to the right of the stage. They were excellent seats that would give us a commanding view. The best views of all were from the center of the stalls, but the narrow seats left you crowded together with many other people, so few nobles liked to sit there. Lord Simeon hadn’t even considered it, I was sure.

An attendant opened the door for us and we entered our box. Stepping into the confined space, I could see seats and a small table toward the front. Excited, I leaned against the edge of the balcony and looked around. Rows of audience members’ heads sat in lines below, while the stage was still hidden by a curtain.

In the orchestra pit, the musicians were already preparing to start.

Looking to the left, I could see the reserved seats right in front of the stage meant for especially prestigious guests. The regular seats obstructed my view of them somewhat, so I leaned forward slightly. Then I could just make out Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto having a pleasant chat.

“Be careful, Marielle.”

“They look like they’re having fun.” I giggled. “There really is something special about going out on the town with your betrothed, isn’t there? I remember it well. I recall there being quite a few unusual incidents, though.”

“Some of which I would rather not remember, thank you very much. Either way, I’d prefer it if you stopped leaning out of the box like that. It would be dangerous if you fell, and it’s not becoming. Come now!”

I felt Lord Simeon’s arms wrap around my waist. Chuckles came from nearby audience members who must have heard our conversation. One even said, “Is that a father and daughter? What are they doing?”

The small hubbub reached Princess Henriette, and she turned our way. *Oh! Did our eyes meet just now?* Keeping in mind where I was and who I was looking at, I didn’t wave, but gave a graceful curtsy instead. *I’m not a child, after all. I know how to behave. He’s my husband, not my father!*

Though Lord Simeon wore a less-than-pleased expression, I brushed him off with a smile and sat down. Just as I removed my overcoat and got comfortable, our food was served. Those watching the show from boxes could choose to receive this service if they wished. The play would start around dinnertime and not end for several hours, so there were many guests who enjoyed a meal while attending the show. However, the only items served were small dishes that could quietly be eaten with hands alone so as not to disturb the other theatergoers. This included sandwiches, quiche, and small cakes.

As I started in on the simple yet delicious food, showtime arrived. The noise in the auditorium died down and the curtain slowly began to rise. *It’s starting at last!* I stopped eating for the time being and fixed my gaze firmly on the stage.

The first scene was a soliloquy from the heroine. The story began with her

reminiscing on her past from her deathbed. In a dark but ornately decorated room, an isolated bed appeared. The heroine reached out her arms from it and launched into a monologue brimming with grief and regret. From where I was sitting, every word of her well-projected voice was crystal clear.

However, even as I listened attentively to her lines, I had a faint sense that something was not quite right. I wasn't alone in this. Other audience members began to react similarly. Silence had fallen in the auditorium when the play first started, but now chatter was emerging again, making it harder to hear the lead actress from the stage. She showed no sign of noticing. Surely she was wondering what all the fuss was about, yet she remained steadfast and kept delivering her lines.

She probably couldn't see it—there, on the scenery behind the bed, what looked like graffiti was scrawled across a section of wall. It had been there when the curtain rose, making the strange sight visible to all. *This can't be part of the performance. There's definitely something odd about it.*

Opera glasses were provided in the box seats, so I lifted a pair to my face. They collided with my spectacles, which I removed before taking another look.

"You're joking..." I said at last.

"Marielle? What is it?"

I'd been aware that the graffiti consisted of words, but only now, with the aid of the opera glasses, could I see what was written. When I had finished reading the short message, I couldn't keep my mouth from hanging agape.



“What does it say?” Lord Simeon asked.

I passed him the opera glasses so he could see for himself. He removed his glasses too—then stiffened for a moment after he took in the words. His face grim, Lord Simeon lowered the opera glasses. Both of us put our own spectacles back on, then looked at each other in silence.

“When all curtains on the stage fall,” the message read, “I will come to take the Violet Lady.”

It was signed “Lutin.”

Chapter Five

Turning my back on the increasingly loud commotion, I made for the box's exit.

As I dashed out into the corridor, Lord Simeon chased after me. "Marielle!"

"The culprit can't be far away! If that had been there all along, someone working at the theater would have noticed. It must have been written just before the performance started."

"Not necessarily," Lord Simeon replied. "No one could casually scribble something on a piece of scenery with so many eyes around. It's more likely that the piece of scenery had an extra layer of cloth covering it that was connected to the curtain by thread or some such. When the curtain rose, it was then lifted up to reveal the piece underneath. A mechanism like that could not have been prepared directly beforehand."

"I see your point," I replied hesitantly, "but it *would* need to be connected to the curtain shortly before it rose. Either way, the culprit must have blended in among the staff!"

Hitching up my skirt, I hurtled down the corridor like a woman possessed. At least, I did in my mind. *Ugh, these clothes are so restrictive that the most I can manage is a brisk walk. Lord Simeon is walking next to me at a comfortable pace!*

"What do you think you can do by hurrying to the scene?" he asked. "They probably won't allow outsiders backstage to begin with."

"You saw the name! That was a warning from Lutin!"

"So?"

Lord Simeon's voice had deepened just a touch. Surprised by the chill in his tone, I turned to face him. The light blue eyes looking down at me from behind his glasses held a challenging look.

“What’s wrong, Lord Simeon?”

“So what if Lutin’s here? Do you want to see him?”

It was clear in an instant that he was displeased. Immediately, I thought, *That has nothing at all to do with this!* Yet then I found myself questioning, *Am I sure?*

Why *was* I so determined to ascertain for certain whether Lutin was present? Obviously, I was curious after having just seen a message claiming to be from him. This was a twist the likes of which you might see in a novel—how could I not leap at the chance? Still, was that really the sole reason? Lutin was not an unknown figure in my life. I had met him several times, gotten to know him, and even thought of him as something akin to a friend. For his part, he had tried to woo me on numerous occasions, so I knew that he held a favorable opinion of me.

My footsteps slowed. I wasn’t quite sure how to answer Lord Simeon. I hadn’t run out of the box because I wanted to see Lutin. My body had sprung into action on its own, driven by the realization that the criminal was close at hand. That was all...wasn’t it?

When thinking about Prince Liberto, I had also wondered if Lutin might have accompanied him here to the theater. Was that, too, because I subconsciously wanted to see him again? *If it’s a question of whether I want to see him or not, I suppose that maybe I do. Knowing an acquaintance—a friend—is nearby, how could I help wanting to see his face?*

Lutin wasn’t a man I could easily see whenever I pleased. Most of the time, I had absolutely no idea where he was. I simply had to wait for the opportunity to arise, never able to go and seek him out. Even so, I harbored no romantic interest in him. My heart belonged to Lord Simeon alone. Whatever happened, Lutin would never be any more than a friend to me.

In any case, I had to deny Lord Simeon’s assertion. I didn’t want to arouse any suspicion and hurt his feelings.

“I...”

Just as I was about to say that I was solely interested in finding the culprit,

Lord Simeon's face turned grimmer still as he looked ahead of us. I followed his gaze, wondering what he had seen.

By now, we were closing in on the grand staircase. Beyond it, I could see the large open space of the entrance hall. With the play ongoing, a lone figure stood in the upper corridor—a man leaning against the railing.

I froze with a gasp. The man was wearing a black coat draped over his shoulders. His short black hair flicked up playfully at the ends, and his handsome face held a youthful spiritedness. His eyes, looking our way, were as blue as the ocean. Even from this distance, I knew him.

“Lutin!”

No sooner had I called his name than Lord Simeon made his move. Kicking off against the marble mosaic tiles, he darted toward Lutin. In that moment, a fearless smile rose on Lutin's face, and in the next, Lutin leaned backward over the railing and cast himself downward.

I almost screamed, but the sound caught in my throat. His coat fluttered like a black pair of wings, then he quickly disappeared from view. It was quite a drop to the lower level! As I stood there, paralyzed, Lord Simeon jumped after him. One quick glance below, then over the railing he went.

You too, Lord Simeon?

I took off in a panic. My feet tripping on the hem of my dress, I practically collapsed against the railing and grasped it tightly. A chill coursing through me, I looked down. The two of them were already out of sight, but a security guard was just running into the corridor below the railing, shouting, “Excuse me! That area is for employees only!” The sound echoed through the hall, growing distant before fading entirely. I was so overwhelmed with relief that I felt ready to collapse.

My goodness, why must they be so reckless?! You don't simply jump from a height like that and expect to walk away uninjured!

Exhaling all the air from my chest, I got up. There was no mistaking it—that man had been Lutin. Did this mean the warning was genuinely from him? Despite seeing him at the scene with my very eyes, part of me remained

skeptical. I'd never heard of Lutin giving an advance warning before. He always claimed a crime after the fact by leaving a calling card or taking out an advertisement thanking the victims in a ridiculous manner or something similar. After all, his true goal was to gather intelligence. His burglaries were pure misdirection. Who would notice information being stolen when treasures were being taken so brazenly? *That* was Lutin the mysterious thief's *raison d'être*. It wasn't that he enjoyed the thrill of pitting himself against the guards and slipping through their fingers. Giving a warning would only make it harder for him to operate, so he wouldn't do such a thing.

As another doubt floated through my mind, I glanced back at the doors to the corridor leading to the boxes. Deeper inside, in the reserved seats, were Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto. This sort of a disturbance would ruin their long-awaited night out together. Would Lutin pull a stunt like this right before his master's eyes? I didn't know much about their relationship, but I had the impression that Lutin was rather devoted.

Hence my pause on the matter. It seemed to me as though it might be the work of a copycat rather than the famous thief himself.

Yes, that's it. The reason I rushed here was to find that out for certain. My thoughts have finally caught up to my impulse. I wanted to catch the culprit and confirm their identity.

And yet the man I'd found was none other than Lutin himself. What was going on? Had he really written that message? Could it have been on Prince Liberto's orders? To what end if so?

The more I mused on it, the less I understood. I walked over to the staircase and descended to the lower level. Several security guards were posted to watch the items on display. There was no sign of anything amiss with *The Violet Lady*. It was still there, just as it had been before the performance.

As I was looking at the painting, Mr. Blanche ran in with several staff members. His face pallid, he made a beeline for *The Violet Lady*. Once he confirmed that no one had stolen it, he breathed a deep sigh of relief, just as I had moments ago.

"Is the play still continuing?" I asked.

Only now did he notice me and look my way. He shook his head wearily, seeming an altogether different person from when we'd first met. "We've lowered the curtain for now. It's not realistic to continue under the circumstances. Please accept my deepest apologies for the disruption on the occasion of your visit."

"There's hardly any need for *you* to apologize, Mr. Blanche. You're the victim."

"I appreciate you seeing it that way, but for this to occur in front of the princess, not to mention the visiting prince..."

"It will be all right," I replied, albeit somewhat hesitantly. "Princess Henriette is a very kind, openhearted person, and Prince Liberto certainly wouldn't blame you either. I'm sure of it! You needn't worry at all!"

If Prince Liberto was in fact the one behind the incident, he *especially* wouldn't be in a position to blame Mr. Blanche. If he did, I would have to have a few words with him.

As I was trying to lift the manager's spirits, Lord Simeon returned. "He got away," he said, shaking his head. Regret tinged his voice.

It was a mark of Lutin's skill that he could escape even Lord Simeon's grasp. I walked over to my husband's side.

Addressing Mr. Blanche, he asked, "What can you tell us about the history of this painting?"

"Its history, you say?" He grew flustered under Lord Simeon's intense gaze. The color that had just returned to his face swiftly drained from it again.

Gently nudging my husband, I said, "Mr. Blanche is the victim here. Don't terrify him like that."

He paused a moment, then replied, "I had no intention of doing so. I was merely asking a question in a normal manner."

"You still look outraged. Honestly, take a few deep breaths and *smile*."

"Yes, *smile*..." he repeated, pronouncing the word slowly.

"Apologies! No need for that after all! The normal manner is absolutely fine!"

Lord Simeon's conscious attempt at a smile only amplified his menacing gleam. He looked positively savage. This made the others present cower even further, everyone drawing back at once. Lord Simeon himself was quietly shocked by their reactions. *I'm sorry I said anything!*

"It's something I happened to see when I went to an auction in Lavia," Mr. Blanche replied at last, wiping the sweat from his face. Though he was still trembling slightly, he had done his best to regain his composure. As the theater manager, he had to handle the situation no matter how dire it was. "I'm not aware of any particular history. The previous owner told me it was something they'd had in their house and that they didn't know any of the particulars. After their parents died, it turned up while dealing with the estate. They had it evaluated by a specialist, and after it was found to be a Cottinelli, they decided to put it up for sale. I bid for it, but there was no competition, so it didn't sell for an especially high price either. Converted to algiers, it was a hair under five hundred."

"Surprisingly cheap," I interjected reflexively. I could have covered that with my personal allowance. I'd have expected a piece by a famous painter to be a hundred times more expensive.

"It's because it's a portrait. Cottinelli painted a great number of them, and their lack of scarcity prevents them from commanding higher prices. A landscape likely would have gone for twenty or thirty thousand."

"My word. I see."

"It's not the sort of painting I'd think anyone would want to steal. It certainly wouldn't warrant sending such a warning." He pointed to some of the other items on display. "That sheet music is significantly more valuable, as is that violin."

Lord Simeon looked at the painting and frowned, lost in thought.

Following the incident, the scenery on stage was replaced in a great hurry and the play was restarted from the beginning. However, the chatter in the auditorium persisted all the way through. I felt sorry for the actors. Nobody was especially focused on the drama; their attention was fully absorbed by the excitement of a warning from the famous thief. The play itself was actually

rather good fun, but it sadly failed to elicit big laughs at the key moments. There was very little in the way of curtain calls as well, with many audience members leaving their seats quickly after the performance ended. Once it was certain that the curtain would not rise again, we also set about readying to leave.

“What a way to give a warning,” I remarked. “It made the evening worse for everyone—though if they were trying to make a strong impression, they succeeded at that. I’m sure it will be on the front page of all the papers tomorrow.”

I thought about arranging a visit later to see if everything was all right. This must have been quite horrible for Mr. Blanche and the actors.

When I mentioned this, Lord Simeon replied, “You might find that they’re glad to be at the center of a strange incident. Now all eyes in Sans-Terre will be on the Théâtre d’Art. Starting tomorrow, people will be falling over themselves to buy tickets.”

“These are people who care deeply about their craft. They wouldn’t delight in becoming the talk of the town for *this*. Besides, the Théâtre d’Art is already popular. They don’t need dire threats to draw an audience.” Tilting my head, I said, “I wonder if it was really Lutin who wrote that message.”

The hour was quite late now, so it was sure to be cold outside. My off-the-shoulder dress had a robe over it and a cape I layered on top of that.

“Put this on as well,” Lord Simeon said, wrapping his own scarf around me.

The sensation of soft cashmere swaddled my neck, which was bare because my hair was tied up. Pretending to simply be enjoying the warmth of it, I surreptitiously drew my nose closer. His scent still lingered on the garment. It wasn’t a strong scent like that of perfume, but a subtle, secretive smell.

“Do you have any reason to suspect it *wasn’t* Lutin?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. It’s just a rather inscrutable incident. Several details have intrigued me.”

“I’m not certain you should concern yourself with it too heavily. In one sense you’ve had a welcome distraction, but you do have something else you’re supposed to be thinking about.”

A soft groan escaped my lips. “Oh no. Don’t remind me. I suppose I had better start working on it again once we’re home.”

Giving me a light pat on the head, Lord Simeon ushered me out of the box and we exited into the corridor together. There, I caught sight of some men in the white uniform of the royal guards. They noticed us as well and saluted their superior officer. At that same moment, Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto emerged from a door farther along.

The princess approached and took the lead in speaking to us. “Good evening, Marielle. Simeon.”

Lord Simeon and I bowed and curtsied respectively. I replied, “Lovely to see you. What a surprise to find you here as well.”

“Prince Liberto invited me out.”

She looked as thrilled as ever. She peered up at her fiancé, her cheeks flushing an ever deeper shade of red as he returned her smile. Even an onlooker wouldn’t be able to help blushing at the sight of a couple so madly in love—by all appearances, at least.

Steeling my courage, I spoke to the prince as well. “They say that Lavia is the home of theater, so I’d be intrigued to know how you found watching a play in Lagrange. Though perhaps this doesn’t make for the best reference, I suppose. Not when there’s been such a terrible fuss. I’m sure the actors are immensely disappointed as well. Imagine having to go through this when they have such an esteemed visitor.”

Lord Simeon cast a fleeting glance at me—but only a glance.

The prince did not falter for a moment. Smiling kindly, he shook his head. “They needn’t be disappointed at all. Their singing and acting was magnificent. How impressive that they carried on as normal rather than losing their nerve. It’s a shame for such an incident to have occurred inside the theater, of course, but they did themselves proud.”

As he spoke, the beautiful prince wore an impeccably angelic expression. There was nary a hint of blame or ill will. Despite touching on the poor actors’ struggle, he acted as though it had made no impact on his enjoyment of the

production, rather speaking highly of it and the theater. He was a kind man to praise the actors while not allowing all the fuss to impact his mood. Anyone who didn't know better would think no more and no less than that. Absolutely nothing about him suggested that he could potentially be the culprit behind this all. In fact, his smile was so innocent that I almost felt ashamed to regard him with such suspicion.

Still, that's only judging by appearances... That perfection, that lack of even the slightest fault, it's suspicious in itself. He is Lutin's master, after all. That was a firmly established fact known to Lord Simeon and Prince Severin as well, which made it more than a little excessive for him to be feigning ignorance to such a degree. He was actively putting up a naive front. That much was clear. It is quite remarkable, though. If he can play the role this perfectly, he might be the best actor in the building.

A shiver ran down my spine. It was nerves in the face of this unknown character, exasperation that he could be so brazen, and...

Fangirling.

My heart would not stop pounding. This was a *true* blackhearted scoundrel—the exact opposite of Lord Simeon, appearing pure on the outside while being dark and mysterious underneath! *And why would I expect otherwise? A mere nice, polite man would never be fit to be the future grand duke of a complicated country like Lavia!*

Oblivious to all this, Princess Henriette innocently commented, “What a surprise, though. I never expected to see a warning from Lutin the mysterious thief with my own eyes. The ‘Violet Lady’ he mentioned refers to the painting downstairs, doesn't it?” She turned to the prince. “I remember you remarking on it before the performance.”

“Yes,” he replied. “It caught my eye because Cottinelli is a Lavian painter. His style is true to life but defined by gentle colors and brushstrokes. His pieces are always heartwarming to behold. We have several at the Lavian palace as well.”

“Are you a fan of his, perhaps?” I asked.

“Yes, I'd say so. He's one of the artists I appreciate. What about you, Mrs. Flaubert?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know a great deal about art. Cottinelli’s work must hold particular value, though, if Lutin is after it.”

“Indeed, one would think so. I must say, it looks like an ordinary portrait.”

“I thought the same, but then again, as a layman, I wouldn’t know much about the value of art. Still, if your family collects them, every one must be a masterpiece.”

Lord Simeon furtively poked me from behind. It was a clear sign that I should exercise some restraint...but, with a mental apology, I pretended not to notice the warning.

With no hint of perturbation whatsoever, Prince Liberto replied, “I’m not sure I would even call it something as grandiose as a collection. In my grandfather’s day, Cottinelli was commissioned to paint some portraits for us. Oh, though there is one landscape among them. This was probably purchased as a gesture of support. Cottinelli wasn’t valued in his own lifetime, you know.” His tone was that of casual small talk.

“Oh, really?” I asked.

Lord Simeon drew a small breath. *It’s quite all right—I won’t say anything that would be perceived as uncouth. I’m only looking to gauge the prince’s reactions. Did Lutin write that message of his own volition, or was it his master’s orders?* I meant to find out, but the prince had given me so little in the way of clues that I couldn’t discern much of anything.

“I must say, I find this all rather odd,” I continued. “Until now, Lutin has never given a warning like this. Why would he go out of his way to draw such attention in advance? Part of me wonders if he might have known that the two of you were coming and wanted to flaunt his presence to you.”

“Hmm? To us? Why would he do that?”

“For that, I have no explanation. Perhaps that painting has some connection to the grand ducal family, for example.”

Lord Simeon ostentatiously cleared his throat. Wrapping an arm around my waist, he pulled me away with a measure of force. “It’s getting rather late, so we mustn’t detain them too long. If you’d like to chat, perhaps we could

arrange an appointment another day, when there will be more time.”

His light blue eyes bore down on me with a look of reproach. *Have I overstepped? It's rather tricky when dealing with someone so skilled at their craft.*

I dutifully drew the conversation to a close. “Of course. My apologies—I’m still so excited from the play, I suppose. How rude of me.”

With a rueful smile, Princess Henriette replied, “I’m far from talked out myself. Lord Simeon has been this way since he was a boy. The minute it gets remotely late at night, he complains that he’s ready for bed. I’ve never been quite sure whether he was a royal guard or a wet-nurse.”

“Ooh! I can just picture it!”

Lord Simeon coughed loudly again, while the prince began to chuckle.

“Why don’t you come to the palace tomorrow?” the princess asked. “Then we can gossip all we like.”

I immediately accepted the invitation and the visit was set. Apparently, as Prince Liberto had work to do, he couldn’t spend all day with her. We could thus take up our conversation again in her free time. I was sure that she would spend a good bit of it speaking fondly of her sweetheart. *Well, that will be valuable material for me as well. I look forward to it!*

Lord Simeon and I descended to the lower level with the engaged couple. *The Violet Lady* was no longer there, having been removed from display for now. This was not only a safeguard against theft, I expected, but to prevent a deluge of curious visitors. An attendant, speaking loudly to be heard, was giving an explanation. When the assembled crowd of theatergoers realized that the painting had been moved, they calmly dispersed toward the exit.

The princess and prince would be departing via an exit for the royal family’s exclusive use, so we parted ways with them at this point. Prince Liberto’s calm, mild-mannered mask had not slipped for even a moment the entire time.

Swaying with the carriage as I sat next to Lord Simeon, I said, “He presents a sweet face to the world, but there’s a villainous interior underneath, I’m sure. That conversation was enough to convince me—there’s no way that warning

came as a complete surprise to the prince. How could he have been so calm otherwise?”

As we moved away from the theater district and toward the suburbs on our route home, the amount of illumination outside the windows gradually abated.

“If Lutin had acted on his own,” I continued, “that would essentially be an act of rebellion against his master. Imagine if one of your subordinates caused a commotion like that right in front of you. You’d be most displeased, I’m sure. Anger always rankles a person. Even if his smile never wavered, there should have still been a bristling air about him.”

Rather than agreeing with my opinion, Lord Simeon chided me with a slight frown. “Don’t be so quick to draw conclusions when you know so little of the circumstances. We don’t even know if Lutin was actually responsible for this.”

“How interesting. I had assumed you were firmly convinced of that already. If not, why did you chase after him?”

“It would have been strange not to chase after him in that situation.”

The casual nature of his reply left me internally shaking my head. *If he’d caught him, he wouldn’t have been nearly this serene, I’m sure! He’d have piled on the pressure and shown no mercy!*

“Regardless of who was responsible,” I replied, “Lutin did appear at the scene. That can’t be a mere coincidence, can it?”

“I’ll grant you that, but I don’t see why Prince Liberto would want to steal the painting. Even if we assume he’d like to have it due to some special connection to his family, his first port of call would be to negotiate a purchase. A prince has no need to jump immediately to theft.”

“What if he tried to purchase it, but was refused? Mr. Blanche seemed somewhat suspicious as well. Despite saying there was nothing special about the painting, his treatment of it suggests otherwise.”

I thought back to the manager’s face as he gazed upon the portrait, which resembled his daughter Grace in her twenties from about a decade ago. His expression had been a tender one indeed, as if staring into the past—but would such a painting truly bring on nostalgia so strongly? It would be one thing if it

resembled his daughter as a child, but as a grown woman, her appearance hadn't changed significantly in the span of ten years. I was certain that there had been something else behind Mr. Blanche's gaze—something that stirred even deeper memories for him.

"He bid on it because it looked like Grace," I said. "There's nothing strange about that as such. What *is* strange is where he put it on display. Why not hang it in his home or his private office? What reason did he have for showcasing it at the theater for all to see?"

Lord Simeon was silent in response.

"Grace is a good singer and actress, but she is often cast in supporting roles. I've never heard any hint of her being given preferential treatment. Mr. Blanche doesn't seem like the type to mix business and personal matters. That makes it especially odd for him to demonstrate such obvious favor by displaying the likeness of his daughter so prominently."

Still silent, Lord Simeon folded his arms. Leaning far back in his seat, his eyes closed, he almost looked as though he were asleep, but I knew he was taking in every word I said. Whatever I talked about, he always listened and responded. He wasn't the sort of person to ignore me, or to let my words go in one ear and out the other.

Knowing this, I was comfortable continuing. "Also, when all the commotion occurred, he ran to the entry hall to check on the painting in a very visible panic. He was as white as a sheet. Then, upon confirming it was still in place, he breathed a huge sigh of relief. All this when the painting only cost him five hundred algiers. It's not a family heirloom either—he's only bought it recently. Nobody wants their property stolen, no matter how little it's worth, but that's still an odd reaction, don't you think?"

Still nothing but pensive silence from Lord Simeon.

"This is quite a puzzle indeed. Every aspect of it is an unknown. What on earth is going on?"

When I punctuated my thoughts with a sigh, Lord Simeon sighed too and uncrossed his arms. Looking at me with a resigned expression, he finally said, "There are some details we *do* know. I've no doubt Mr. Blanche put the painting

on display not to show it off, but because he truly wanted it to be seen.”

I frowned a moment before replying. “What’s the difference?”

Eager for an explanation, I moved across the seat and clung to Lord Simeon. It had gotten slightly colder, and I wanted to share his warmth. My robe and cape were proving insufficient. He lifted me into his lap and opened the front of his overcoat to cover me as well. His sweet body heat felt comfortable against my cheek as I pressed it against his broad chest. As he gently stroked my back and head, I felt myself close to inadvertently drifting off.

“We can’t be sure of the specifics, of course, but being a portrait, the subject of that painting wasn’t just any woman. What reason might there be to display someone’s picture to a large number of passersby?”

“If they were a missing person, perhaps? Only, the painting was a recent acquisition. Even if it resembles Grace, it’s an entirely different person from thirty years ago. So...then...”

As I struggled to get my head around what Lord Simeon might be suggesting, he showed no sign of irritation. Patiently he confirmed, “Correct. It’s an entirely different person. It’s not the actress it resembles that Mr. Blanche wants to be seen, but rather the model for the painting. Consider it a question—namely, ‘Do you know this person?’”

The gears turned in my mind. “So he was hoping a guest would recognize her. He *did* seem disappointed that so few people had stopped to look at the painting. In that case...does this mean the model is someone Mr. Blanche knows? Do you think he’s trying to find her?”

Considering his age, it was entirely possible that he knew the model. He would have been in his twenties, or thirties at the most, when the painting was done. Could she have been a lover from long ago? *Wait! If she resembles Grace so closely...*

“Could she be Grace’s mother, perhaps?!”

My head shot up with such force that I almost struck Lord Simeon’s chin. With his swift reflexes, he quickly dodged and put a hand on my head to steady me. Apologizing, I returned to my previous posture.

“It’s far too early to be sure,” he replied, “but I do believe it’s a possibility. If so, that would explain why a painting worth so little money holds such value for him. It would also explain much of his behavior, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed.”

Ooh, that’s one mystery solved! Well, it was still only a theory at this stage, but Lord Simeon’s presentation was rather convincing. It made sense of Mr. Blanche’s shock, not to mention the urgency with which he’d come running. If the painting had been stolen, it would have been quite upsetting to him.

“His wife has gone missing or he’s looking for a long-lost lover, so he hung the painting prominently in hopes of it being noticed by someone who knows her. If we assume that, it fits all that we know so far. Most impressive, Lord Simeon!”

I clapped my hands merrily. My husband was truly a multitalented man. He was more than muscle alone. He was a gorilla with a first-rate mind—the Demon Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights! I was ready to jump for joy, crying “That’s my Lord Simeon!”, when I recalled that we still had knots that needed to be untangled.

“Now, that would all explain Mr. Blanche’s reaction,” I said, “but what about the warning from Lutin? I’m sure Prince Liberto hasn’t offered to buy the painting. He showed no sign of any involvement in this, and Mr. Blanche never suggested as much. As you said, it’s hard to imagine Prince Liberto resorting to theft, and even if he did, there would still be no reason to announce it in advance.” Groaning, I found myself pondering endlessly again. I still had no idea as to the intent behind the warning message.

Lord Simeon let out a sigh of exasperation. “Rather than playing detective, don’t you have something else to be racking your brains over? Surely that common criminal is of no consequence.”

“I’m worrying about that as well, thank you very much! Honestly, why must you remind me about it *again*? Besides, with such tantalizing drama in front of me, I can’t simply say it’s of no consequence and look the other way. With this going on, I won’t be able to calmly focus on my writing. In fact, the research opportunity this presents might be even more important.”

“Does Lutin weigh so heavily on your mind?”

“Sulking again, I see! That is not what I meant at all.” I put my hands around Lord Simeon’s face. “I told you, didn’t I? The reason I ran out of the box so suddenly was because I wanted to ascertain whether it was really Lutin’s work or that of a copycat. I wasn’t lying to you or trying to pull the wool over your eyes. I would never even think of betraying you, Lord Simeon.”

“Of course. I know that.”

My goodness. He’s pretending to accept it and still sulking just as much. I stretched up from my seat on his lap to give him a kiss. “I will admit I’m curious to know what he’s up to. He’s an acquaintance—by now, perhaps even a friend, if we’re honest. I don’t mean to deny that I care about him altogether. However, there is absolutely nothing for you to worry about. If Lutin is trying to steal that painting, I’ll still do everything I can to prevent it. Whatever the reason, I won’t brook thievery. All the more when the target is so precious to Mr. Blanche.”

“There’s no need for you to get so involved.”

Exhaling, Lord Simeon adjusted his arms around me. The kiss he gave me in return was long and passionate. Between muffled moans, I said, “Our glasses... Our glasses are colliding...”



Our second pair of matching glasses—the first had been broken and replaced only recently—crashed against each other when our faces met. *Not only does it hurt, but we'll damage them again!*

“Honestly,” I said as he finally pulled away and I pushed my pair, which had slipped down, back up my nose.

Lord Simeon wore a faintly self-satisfied look as he pushed his own pair back into place. *My love, you are simply too cute for words! That devilish, boyish charm—and your sulking face too.*

“Mr. Blanche will undoubtedly talk to the police and request their assistance to prevent the painting from being stolen. They won’t need a third party to step in,” he told me.

As he spoke, he looked out of the window. We had traveled quite far as our conversation went on. By now, we had almost reached the suburbs. Unlike the bustling city center, which never slept, it was bedtime already in this part of town. Very few windows had lamps burning, and the streets were silent apart from the rattling of our carriage.

“Our only role in this is that we happened to be present,” he went on. “Mr. Blanche hasn’t requested our assistance. It’s only natural to be intrigued, but our position is that of curious onlookers. Please keep that firmly in mind.”

“Hmph.”

Told that so frankly, there wasn’t much I could say in turn. Admittedly, I had neither a right nor a duty to step in. I was no more than an onlooker, as Lord Simeon had said. Miffed, I fiddled with his cravat in front of me. His hand patted my back as if calming a child.

“The police can’t stop Lutin, you know,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean we can freely involve ourselves. I’ll report to His Highness the Crown Prince tomorrow, and I will abide by whatever he decides. If Prince Liberto is truly involved, we must proceed with great caution.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded after a pause.

As he continued to pat me with a regular rhythm, I gradually grew drowsy.

Even as I tried to remind myself that I still had important business to deliberate on, my eyelids felt so heavy that I couldn't keep them from falling. Lord Simeon watched as I slowly began to drift off.

"When all curtains on the stage fall, I will come to take the Violet Lady."

Had that really been a warning from Lutin? Why would someone target a painting that held no particular value to anyone besides Mr. Blanche? Something wasn't right. The warning wasn't an invitation to prevent the theft, but rather merely an announcement of it... A way to draw all eyes to it, no? What if the painting wasn't the real target, but...

I had the feeling I was just on the cusp of understanding something—that I'd seen the way to untangle the knotted thread. Only, my thoughts were gradually melting away. Thanks to the hand gently continuing to pat me, trying to send me off to sleep, the land of dreams successfully took hold of my consciousness.

In the back of my mind, black wings unfurled. A familiar face, one that always tried to woo me in such a jovial manner, suddenly turned away from me coldly. It vanished with an audacious grin—and in his place appeared a beautiful man with flaxen hair. It was the heir to a grand duchy, casually lying with a sweet smile. His manner, the very picture of blackheartedness, had my spirits soaring...but what if he was plotting something nefarious?

Princess Henriette innocently yearned for the day of their wedding. I could only hope that whatever lay ahead of us wouldn't crush her feelings underfoot...

Chapter Six

I overslept the next morning after staying up so late. By the time I awoke, my husband had already left the house. I'd been so determined not to miss my chance to see him off, but so much for that. Eating breakfast alone, I sullenly wished that I had asked him to wake me.

As expected, the events of the prior evening made it into all the papers. The story covered the entire front page of *La Môme*, of course, but *Chersie* also devoted a great deal of page space to it. Since the reporting in gossip rags tended to lack credibility, I started with the broadsheets. Unfortunately, this provided me with little new information. The painting was only described in exactly the same terms Mr. Blanche had used the previous night. It was clarified, however, that the mechanism by which the warning had appeared on the stage was precisely as Lord Simeon suspected.

I suppose it would be straightforward enough for Lutin, a master of disguise, to dress as someone who worked at the theater and tamper with the scenery. If it was a copycat, however, what might their motivation be? A ruse, perhaps?

I was finally able to put my finger on what had eluded me just before I fell asleep. It seemed to me that the worth of the painting was a mere red herring. Rather, such a public warning was meant to draw a huge amount of attention—to make sure plenty of people were *seeing* the painting.

Simply hanging it wouldn't be enough to ensure it had eyes on it. Even a large theater was hardly frequented by everyone in the city. If you wanted information about a missing person, you would have to make it more of a hot topic...and if that were the goal, the previous night's commotion had been ideal. It had made its way into every paper, so word had spread all across Sans-Terre with the break of dawn.

This gave rise to the theory, however tentative, that Mr. Blanche had concocted the entire incident himself with that in mind. However, this didn't ring true to me. His reaction had been too genuine. Putting the painting away

so quickly would also conflict with the goal of wanting people to see it.

Moreover, Lutin had been there. What was the reason for his presence? Pure coincidence, perhaps? Maybe Prince Liberto simply happened to be visiting on the night all this was planned to occur, and Lutin, who worked for him, had come along too. The culprit might have used Lutin's name without ever imagining that the man himself could be in the building.

Looking down at the spread of newspapers on the table, I cocked my head dubiously. These were potential explanations, certainly, but I couldn't help feeling they were all somewhat forced.

Honestly, I blame Lutin as well. He didn't have to run off without a word of explanation. Usually he's so fond of talking my ear off!

All my ponderings led nowhere except to me cursing the thief in my mind. Then I heard the voice of my mother-in-law as she entered the room. "Are you still dilly-dallying? You're going to the palace today. If you don't get dressed, you'll be late."

This urging prompted me to look at the clock. I still had plenty of time, however. The journey from the Flaubert manor to the palace took less than thirty minutes, so there was no need to rush.

"I don't have to be there just yet. I was invited for lunch, so I plan to arrive slightly before that."

"I heard that you fell asleep in the carriage last night, and that after arriving home, you were so sleepy that it was a struggle to remove your makeup. Do you mean to show yourself before the princess in such a state? You're the future lady of House Flaubert, so you must act like it. Take a bath before getting changed and clean yourself up properly. Come now! Hurry!" She turned. "I'll leave her in your hands."

At the countess's behest, Joanna entered with some other maids, leaving me in no position to raise any objections. Before I knew it, I'd been dragged into the bathroom, stripped of my clothes, and plunged into the bathtub. While I was scrubbed like a vegetable, Countess Estelle issued orders on the other side of the door. Apparently, once again, I wouldn't be allowed to select my own dress.

Clad head to toe in her chosen ensemble, I arrived at the palace exactly at the appointed time. There, Princess Henriette greeted me amiably as always. “Welcome!”

She wore a deep burgundy dress embroidered with golden ivy and berries. It was a lovely outfit that radiated autumnal vibrance. The voluminous ringlets of her hair were also adorned with berries made of gold.

I was shown to a room on the ground floor that looked out on a small garden. It was a bright and open space, half of which was fashioned like a greenhouse. Though we were in a season where few flowers bloomed, the bushes thick with their autumn foliage had chrysanthemums imported from an eastern land flourishing among them.

Inside the room, a little dog with long black and white fur was playing about. As I entered, she came running over, her paws beating against the floor. Princess Henriette’s beloved pet had been a gift from Prince Liberto. I crouched and patted her head, which was perhaps even smaller than a cat’s.

“Good day, Pearl!”

She was a clever girl who loved being around people, and she remembered me well. She wagged her tail in joy, not barking at my arrival at all.

The princess invited me to sit in a comfortable chair by the window. We sat facing one another while the dog pawed pleadingly at her skirt. As she lifted Pearl into her lap and petted her, she remarked on my outfit. “You were dressed fabulously last night as well, but you’re stunning again today. Do you have someone picking your outfits?”

“My mother-in-law,” I replied with a half-smile. “Since I married into the family, she’s made most of my fashion choices for me.”

Telling the countess that I didn’t like ostentatious clothes had, admittedly, led her to select more subdued options. To make up for that, though, their upscale feel had increased manifold. I was far too fashionable—not plain in the slightest. How could I blend into the background like this? It was a serious problem.

Sensing the feelings underlying my response, Princess Henriette chuckled.

“The countess’s fondness for fashion is well-known. It’s no surprise that she’s able to choose looks that suit you so perfectly. Despite the muted tones, there’s no hint of drabness whatsoever—only an unmistakable level of polished sophistication.”

“That’s exactly what bothers me.”

“I’d have thought a cuter, more youthful look would suit you best, but you look remarkably at home in this sort of dress as well. You’ve started to have a far more grown-up air about you.”

“Oh, really?!”

“Absolutely. I’d never describe you as childlike if you’re dressed like this. It’s most impressive. I wonder if I could ask Countess Estelle to share her style expertise with me as well.” She ran a hand over her skirt as she spoke.

I couldn’t help angling my head, slightly perplexed. Her dress was lovely in its own way, with a style befitting a princess and a delightful charm about it. “Are you planning to order a new dress?”

“It’s not that. Rather, I wish I could have that same kind of sophistication.”

“You’re far more sophisticated than I am already.”

“Hmm, how shall I put this?” she said in a tone hinting at embarrassment, restlessly grasping her skirt. “I’m saying that I’d like a sweeter, more mild-mannered appearance, rather than looking so strong-willed. Something along those lines, at least.”

She looks this sweet, yet she wants more? My heart already skipped a beat when I first saw her today!

I fought back a grin. There was only one reason a girl would act this way. Undoubtedly, she wanted to be sure that the prince found her appealing. The ladies-in-waiting in the room chuckled furtively as well. There was something so charming about seeing a woman in love.

I couldn’t start gleefully poking fun at the princess, however, so I chose my words carefully. “I can pass your request on to my mother-in-law if you’d like, but you really needn’t worry. If Prince Liberto saw you right now, he would start

fanboying—I mean, he would find you irresistible.”

I had expected her face to redden at the mention of the prince, but instead, she frowned despondently and said, “I wonder.”

Oh? I was stunned for a moment. This was quite the unexpected response. In an instant, she’d lost all her verve and was left staring silently down at her hands anxiously. She raised her head as if to collect herself, but her smile fell slightly again before she could regain it completely.

“Princess Henriette? What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she replied after a pause, shaking her head cheerlessly. When I stole a glance at the ladies-in-waiting, each of them returned my troubled gaze.

“I wouldn’t suggest that you had some sort of falling out with Prince Liberto—that hardly seems possible—but has there been a disagreement, maybe?”

“No, he’s been nothing but kind to me. Don’t worry. It’s honestly nothing. I’m fretting a little too much, that’s all.”

“About what?”

When someone is in love, it’s common enough for their worries to rival or even surpass their elation. Particularly now, when the couple had only just met in person and still don’t know each other very well, it was only natural for the princess to have such thoughts. I remembered the feeling keenly and believed that would make me a good listener on the subject. *Keeping such worries to yourself only sends you deeper into the mire. It’s always better to talk to someone.*

Not wanting to pressure her, I waited patiently for her to talk. Hesitantly, she said at last, “It truly is nothing. You might say I’m concerned because it seems a bit much.”

“You’re scared because you’re feeling *too* happy? Something like that?”

“Not quite. I can’t imagine ever being so happy. Naturally, Prince Liberto hasn’t been cold by any stretch of the imagination. As I said, he’s superlatively kind. When my nerves lead me to say strange and awkward things, he never makes fun of me, but rather answers me courteously every time. He even

listens to me in earnest, never brushing me aside or ignoring me. That much is clear. And yet, all the while, I'm left wondering what he's truly thinking beneath it all."

I see. The trope of worrying about your partner's true intentions.

She continued, "After all, our engagement is purely political. We barely know each other, let alone have fallen in love naturally. I've spoken about this a little before, but from his perspective, I'm a bride that's been foisted upon him. Even if he can accept our union for its strategic value, his personal feelings may be quite different. He might actually find me disagreeable. Perhaps he's in love with another whom he had to abandon because of me. Such are the thoughts that haunt me."

The princess's fears were not vague or even far-fetched. They were quite grounded, and in fact were completely understandable, even inevitable. Despite how buoyantly happy she had appeared, she clearly hadn't forgotten about the underlying realities of the situation.

My expression shifted too. *So behind her cheerful smile, she was thinking about this all along.* Henriette was an intelligent person, equipped with all the wisdom that princesses had drummed into them as part of their education. She usually avoided weighty subjects and talked like an ordinary young woman, but that didn't mean she could ignore everything and give herself completely over to girlish dreams.

"I understand why you'd think that way," I replied, "but it sounds overly pessimistic to me. True, your engagement was born out of the relationship between our countries rather than personal feelings, but that's simply one of many ways to meet someone. There are plenty of women who marry men they've never met beforehand and go on to live very happy lives. What matters is the kind of bond you build after meeting. He told you he wants to forge a good relationship between you, didn't he?"

"Well, yes..."

"Let's suppose he *does* have a lover he left behind. Agreeing to your engagement rather than marrying her was his own choice—one that stemmed from his own judgment and sense of responsibility. That's not anybody's fault."

The princess looked back at me, not saying a word.

“I hesitate to state this too loudly, but I’ve heard rumors that he’s more capable than the current grand duke and is steadily gaining power and influence. He’s even rallied support from the bitterly opposing Lagrange and Easdale factions. It’s difficult to imagine him in a scene from a play come to life where he tearfully parts ways with his lover, unable to oppose his father’s orders.”

He was Lutin’s master, after all. He was no pampered young nobleman. He had cracked the whip quite firmly in an earlier incident when the Easdale faction was running amok, so I was rather impressed he’d maintained their support in spite of it.

Princess Henriette’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. “Where did you get that information?”

“Oh, you know. Here and there,” I chuckled, dodging the question.

She shrugged and returned to the topic at hand. “I understand your point. I’ve considered that might be the case—though if so, there’s also a chance that he’ll continue their relationship on the side.”

“But that’s purely hypothetical, no? We don’t even know that he is in love with someone else.”

“I know, but it would hardly be surprising. Not with a remarkable man like him. Besides, whether there’s another woman or not, there’s still a chance he might not like me. Perhaps finally meeting me has tragically dashed all his hopes. I’m no exceptional beauty, and people tend to think my thick eyebrows give me something of a willful air. My curly hair turns wild at the slightest provocation, and I’d hardly say I have a voluptuous figure either.”

Now it was my turn to fall silent.

“I... I’m frustrated with myself as well, you know! When I start thinking these things, there’s no end to what my mind can conjure. Yet I can’t help myself.”

At last, she made a high-pitched exclamation just like a child’s and nuzzled Pearl’s fur. The dog wagged her tail, overjoyed, thinking her mistress was playing with her. I exchanged glances with the ladies-in-waiting, and we all

groaned softly. This was quite a serious case. A few comforting words wouldn't be enough to coax the princess out of it.

"Has the prince given any sign to make you think something's amiss?" I asked her.

"No, not at all. He's given no sign of any disgruntlement whatsoever. It's *too* perfect. That's what worries me!"

"Ah, I see. Since his demeanor remains the same whatever he sees or hears, this in turn makes him seem a tad suspicious. It makes you wonder if it's all a polite facade—no?"

Her head darted up. "Yes! Exactly!"

"It's moments of disfavor that actually make someone feel more human, more real. No one is capable of being friendly and sociable one hundred percent of the time. If their surface-level demeanor never breaks, it comes across as reticence—like he's putting a barrier between you, making you feel as though he regards you coldly."

"That's just it!" she exclaimed, sharply pointing toward me. The jolt made Pearl jump down out of her lap. "You've summed it up perfectly. That's precisely how I feel. My fear is that my inability to tell how he really feels underneath is a sign that he's keeping his distance."

"Yes, I can understand that." I nodded sagely and sympathetically.

His smile is unmistakably that of a suspicious rogue. He was able to maintain a straight face even when talking to those like us who are aware of his connection to Lutin. Despite knowing that we would see his pretense for what it was, he was brazen enough to keep up the act anyway and didn't let it slip for a moment.

He was the sort of man who never let anyone see even a fragment of what was inside. The more I thought about him, the more blackhearted he seemed. In that sense, Princess Henriette's doubts were right on the mark. I couldn't tell her this, of course. It would only depress her more. Besides, even if I suspected the prince of being blackhearted, that didn't necessarily mean his entire attitude when spending time with his fiancée was artifice.

I hardly knew what to say. Common platitudes would do nothing to assuage her concerns. “It’s only been a few days since you met, remember. Both of you are still at a stage where you’re nervous about showing your true colors. You’re doing the same thing, aren’t you?”

“Well...yes, I suppose.”

“Whether you drop your prim and proper demeanor to reveal a different side of you once in a while or you manage to keep it up longer term is a matter of your own personal natures, I’d say, not a problem of reticence.”

“Hmm, yes.” Though she nodded, she didn’t look the slightest bit relieved.

Well, if logic alone was enough to talk her out of her concerns, they wouldn’t plague her in the first place. That’s entirely understandable.

“And if it *is* reticence on his part,” I added, “that will resolve itself in time as you get closer and develop a deeper understanding of one another. That’s how relationships of all kinds work. For now, why don’t you approach the situation with a view to keeping an eye on how long his polite friendliness continues?”

She looked somewhat surprised by my suggestion. “Test him, you mean?”

“Only observe him. You needn’t actively set anything up. No matter how skilled someone is at smiling politely, no one can maintain a perfect facade all their life. Sooner or later, you’ll catch a glimpse of the real Prince Liberto. You’ll see unexpected habits and fixations, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, values and beliefs. It’s fun to discover those little things one by one. When you’re married, you’ll be able to observe him at very close range. Isn’t that a thrilling prospect?”

“Thrilling?” she repeated dubiously. Then she fell into thought again as if she didn’t quite understand my meaning, though it wasn’t an especially tough concept to grasp.

It happens naturally with everyone you meet and spend time with. Finding the prince’s smile too perfect and being afraid of what it might belie is only the first step of a long journey. Over time, she’ll come to know him far better. Even if she doesn’t think about it, she’ll start to learn things; but if she consciously pays attention, she’ll be able to see far more.

I feel that's one of the joys of life. Learning about people is fun—all the more when you're married. Prince Liberto is a particularly worthy target of scrutiny. People who are difficult to read at first glance provide that sense of fun for longer, after all. Well, admittedly my feelings on this matter might not exactly be the norm.

“That way of looking at it is just like you, Marielle. It would be nice if I could find the same enjoyment in it.”

“Do you not think it sounds like fun? Don't you want to learn more about Prince Liberto?”

“I do,” she responded, plain and resolute.

Smiling, I took her by the hand. “Getting to know the one you love is the sweetest excitement. Trust me. Even if you don't feel like it now, you'll find yourself enjoying it.”

“Love?” she murmured. “Love sounds a little... I mean...”

It seemed a little late for *that* to provoke such a reaction, but the princess's face turned bright red. I hadn't expected this and couldn't help needling her slightly. “Oh, really? You've opened your heart about all your maidenly sorrows, yet you insist you don't feel that way about him?”

“Well, I... I don't know if it's love yet! I've been longing to meet him all this time, but I only just have. I'm still far too nervous to let my feelings run away with me!”

“You certainly look like you're in love to me.”

The ladies-in-waiting shared in my slightly disbelieving smile. Pearl came back with a toy in her mouth. She looked up at me, her tail wagging, so I took the toy and threw it as far as I could for her.

“If that's the case,” I continued, “many of love's joys still await you. You might find yourself in a position where the prince can play with your feelings rather easily.”

“What? No! Certainly not!”

Pearl bounded after the toy, then came back with it again. *Playing with her*

certainly requires an abundance of patience and stamina! As Princess Henriette and I took turns throwing the toy over and over again, the princess's expression brightened. *Strong emotional ups and downs—another hallmark of a young woman in love. As hard as this can be to go through, it can actually be a fun experience to look back on. I'll just have to keep an eye on her to ensure that she doesn't get too down in the dumps.*

After that, we spoke about all sorts of things *other* than romance while eating lunch. The biggest topic was the warning at the theater from the night before, with the princess showing just as much burning curiosity as the public at large. She wasn't aware of Lutin being Prince Liberto's spy—per His Majesty and Prince Severin's chosen course of action, this information was too sensitive to discuss even with other members of the royal family. Careful to avoid saying anything imprudent, I acted as though I knew nothing of it either.

In the afternoon, the princess planned to take Prince Liberto to the botanical gardens, so we concluded our chat and I took my leave. While walking along the corridor, I thought about possibly stopping by the Royal Order of Knights headquarters on the palace grounds. However, knowing Lord Simeon, if I visited him for no particular reason, he would flatly state that I was getting in the way and shoo me off. *Drat. I should have brought some refreshments with me as a pretext.*

As I racked my brain for another excuse to go there, I noticed someone accompanied by a retinue coming my way. When I saw him, I stopped, moved aside, and bowed my head. The man at the center of the small group did not simply pass by without a word, but rather stopped in front of me.

"Good day, Mrs. Flaubert. Have you been to see the princess?"

It was the very soft-voiced prince we'd been talking about. This was only the third time he and I had met, but it seemed he remembered me. *Odd, since wearing a nice dress doesn't change the indistinct nature of my face. Well done to him for recalling it anyway. Or perhaps he gained an impression of me as a plain woman whose clothes alone are fancy and refined? That certainly would make an impact. Dear oh dear, I had better be more careful.*

Nonetheless, this was an unexpected opportunity. I mentally balled my fists in

determination as I curtsied to him.

“Good day, Prince Liberto. Yes, we ate lunch together and I only just left her. Are you going to her chambers now?”

“Yes, after I’ve concluded some other business. She’s taking me to the royal botanical gardens this afternoon.”

He wore a perfect smile, as if the events of the night before had never happened. Of course, his demeanor then had been the same. *A formidable rogue indeed! No wonder Princess Henriette is feeling so uneasy.*

Not wanting to seem rude, I returned his smile, simultaneously stealing a few glances at those around him. They included attendants from both Lavia and Lagrange. Two knights were there as guards as well. Lutin was absent, of course. I did wonder if he might be hiding among them in disguise, but no one present matched his physical stature.

“Do you have some concern about my retinue?” the prince asked.

Even though I had been looking rather surreptitiously, his sharp eyes had noticed. Perhaps he’d been paying close attention to my reactions right from the start. After a brief second considering my response, I decided there was no point in hiding my actual question. “Not at all. I was simply wondering if Earl Cialdini was with you.” He undoubtedly knew about my prior involvement with Lutin. Why not be plain about it? “He was assigned here for the engagement negotiations, after all, so I was certain he’d have joined you on this trip.”

I had a sense that the prince’s smile deepened just a touch. The difference was subtle enough that no one would have noticed if not consciously looking for it. Hiding our true meanings behind a mask of nonchalance, we engaged in a conversation that no one else understood.

“Ah, yes, you developed an acquaintance with him during that time, didn’t you?”

“And we’ve had several opportunities to meet since then too. I almost thought I saw him last night.”

“Is that so?”

The roguish prince evaded the issue rather than confirming or denying it. His pale turquoise eyes glimmered with amusement. It made him resemble Lutin a great deal. I wondered if the mysterious thief had been shaped by his master's influence, or if they had always been two peas in a pod. I actually felt as though Prince Liberto was the more formidable of the pair.

I heard footsteps approaching. *I suppose I shouldn't detain him here for too long. Still, perhaps I can put him off balance just slightly. It's frustrating to be toyed with and not give him a taste of his own medicine.*

"What sort of work is the earl doing at the moment?" In other words, what was the meaning behind that warning message?

With a secretive chuckle, he countered with a question of his own. "Do you want to see him?"

He won't give me a straightforward answer then. I expected that, but still...

"I would say so, yes," I replied. "I have a number of things I'd like to talk to him about."

"Does he weigh on your mind so heavily?"

"Well, yes—"

Before I could say another word, a stern voice interrupted. "Marielle."

When I whipped my head around, there stood Lord Simeon and Prince Severin. The footsteps had been theirs, it turned out. Lord Simeon came closer at a quick pace, inserted himself between me and Prince Liberto, and bowed. Prince Severin walked over as well, a few steps behind, and stood beside me.

"Has my wife been bothering you at all?"

"By no means," the prince replied with the same placid smile as ever. "She was simply saying hello. She asked me about Earl Cialdini as well, and we talked about him briefly. It seems your wife is quite keen on seeing him again."

Oof. I momentarily felt dark waves emanating from Lord Simeon's broad back. He phrased that in a misleading way on purpose! No wonder Lord Simeon is bent out of shape, especially if he heard any of our exchange just now. Based on how we're standing, Prince Liberto would have seen my husband coming before

I did. He might have even asked that question specifically intending that Lord Simeon would hear it. In fact, there's no "might" about it. He set me up!

Not even conscious of it, I went to take a step forward, but a strong arm pulled me back. Surprised, I saw that Prince Severin had taken hold of me. His face, still turned toward Prince Liberto, bore a calm smile. The firm motion of his hand was enough to send a clear message that I should stay quiet.

Ugh, I was so determined to manipulate him, and instead he manipulated me all over again. Such a blackhearted prince!

Undoubtedly, Lord Simeon was aware of this too, but once his buttons were pushed, there was no unpushing them. Without even looking at his face, I knew that he was thoroughly displeased at having his sorest spot targeted.

"Prince Liberto," the prince beside me interjected, "you're to enjoy an excursion with my little sister this afternoon, isn't that right? She can cause no end of bother, always bumbling about when she's nervous. Still, whenever she sees you, her spirits soar. I hope you have a nice time."

Prince Liberto replied to this, too, with a smile. "I'm enjoying my time with her as well. It was such a long time before we could finally meet, so I really want to make the most of it."

After a brief exchange of bows, Prince Liberto went on his way. The rest of us stood watching as he moved into the distance, then turned a corner and disappeared altogether.

Following a period of silence, His Highness finally released me with a sigh. "You don't start poking at a sly fox like that with such sloppy attempts. Foolish, foolish, foolish!" His knuckles lightly rapped against my head. "You can't seriously think that you're up to the challenge of making him show his true colors. It's an impossible task. Just look. A few words from him and even Simeon's been left cowering."

"Cowering?" my husband objected. "Hardly."

"If that's the case, Your Highness, then you should have gone on the offensive too. And Lord Simeon, why let yourself be taken in by his obvious needling? You're the *original* brutal blackhearted nobleman. You should stand up for

yourself. Give as good as you get.”

“The ‘original’? What are you talking about?”

“If you mean that I should have inquired about last night,” His Highness said, “I already have. Only, he’s not like Simeon, where that’s all a thin veneer. Ordinary methods won’t work on this prince.”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t insist on using me as an example,” Lord Simeon objected.

“It’s not a thin veneer at all! If he puts his mind to it, he won’t lose—not in terms of blackheartedness *or* brutality!” I insisted.

“I have no desire to engage in such a battle, nor do I consider myself ‘brutal’!”

His Highness and I looked at Lord Simeon and shook our heads in unison. There was no taking that argument seriously. His Highness merely said, “Anyway, Marielle, please leave this to us rather than butting in.”

Lord Simeon looked mildly shocked at having his protests ignored so resolutely.

His Highness continued, “Although the man known as Lutin is a thief, he has also been our ally—in the incident with Prince Gracius, for example. There are many dealings between our countries that cannot be discussed publicly. And, candidly, we can’t follow up on every single petty theft that occurs. If it doesn’t affect the fate of the land, then honestly speaking, what becomes of one privately owned painting is largely inconsequential. The victim has my sympathies, but it falls outside of my purview.”

As I stroked my husband’s back soothingly—we had both been teasing him, after all—I argued with Prince Severin. “I realize that, but this is no ordinary theft. If we assume it *is* connected to Prince Liberto, then it must bear some significance. Also, Princess Henriette is feeling anxious. She can hardly tell what he’s really thinking, and neither can I. That’s why I wanted to probe his inner workings a bit.”

“She’s making a big fuss over nothing as usual. One moment she’s obsessed with him, the next she’s letting her own worries pile up on themselves. She’s been that way ever since they first got engaged. You needn’t take her so

seriously.”

“My word, what a mean position for her older brother to take! Very well, then I’ll consult with Julianne.”

“Hold on, what are you planning to say to her? I don’t agree to you badmouthing me.”

Using Lord Simeon as a shield, I dodged His Highness’s outstretched hand. Though my husband looked down at me with his eyebrows knitted into a hint of a frown, I simply smiled back at him. “I’m going to visit my family’s house now. I’ll be back this evening.”

“I don’t mind,” Lord Simeon replied, “but I hope you’re not plotting some sort of scheme.”

That gaze! So penetrating! But don’t worry, I’m not about to cause a diplomatic incident. I won’t go chasing Prince Liberto down. “No, I just want to do some research. Let’s talk properly when I get home. I’ll show you all my love to make up for not being able to see you off this morning. On that note, please don’t give Lord Simeon any overtime today, Your Highness.”

“Tell that to Captain Poisson. Ugh, why must you two make a display of yourselves at every turn? Anyway, at the risk of repeating myself, don’t go stirring up trouble, all right?”

“I won’t!”

His eyes narrowed. “Simeon, do you buy that? Personally, I just felt a shiver run through me!”

“You’re telling me,” Lord Simeon replied. “An ill omen if I’ve ever heard one.”

I stepped away from the two men as their faces paled, deciding it was best to depart before they could stop me. I hadn’t exactly lied, however. It was clear that I was in no position to pry into Prince Liberto any further. Thus I had decided to approach this from a different angle.

Per what I told Lord Simeon, I asked the carriage driver to take me to my family home. I got out in front of the gate, then sent the carriage back to the Flaubert estate with the message that I would return in my family’s carriage

when I was done. Then, rather than passing through the front gate, I went around to the back and quietly went in through the servants' entrance of my old home.

"Welcome back, my lady. You needn't sneak about, though. Your mother has gone out."

I jumped with a start, for no sooner had I entered than my former maid, Natalie, greeted me. "You gave me a fright! How did you know I was here?" I asked.

"I heard the sound of the carriage, so I knew we had a visitor. Then I looked out of the second floor window. I could see you quite clearly from there."

Natalie, who had taken care of me since my childhood, was long past perturbation at any of my behavior. Other servants poked their heads out behind her, but they calmly receded when they discovered it was only me. *I'm glad they're all so understanding...*

"Father and Gerard must be at work, I assume. Do you know what time Mother will be back?"

"She said she would be eating dinner, so she'll return before then. She's gone to visit House Bidault."

"Oh, so she's visiting her family home as well."

Bidault was the barony in which my mother had grown up. If she was visiting my grandmother, she would likely stay there chatting for hours and only return at the last moment. Calculating how much time I would have, I made my way upstairs and burst into my former bedroom. I hadn't yet visited to stay overnight, but my family had kept my room as it was rather than turning it into a guest room just for that eventuality. Inside, I opened a cabinet and pulled out something I was secretly keeping there.

"I'm going to get changed, then go straight out again. Natalie, can you help me?"

"Are you going into the city? Even marriage hasn't changed you, I see. Well, it's not so bad to get some fresh air once a while, but... Wait, are these..."

“Never mind that! There’s no time!”

Urging Natalie to hurry along her assistance, I got changed in a flash. Having stepped up my disguise skills recently, I made for the center of Sans-Terre on my own in perfect costume.

Chapter Seven

“I have a delivery for Grace Blanche. Could someone point me to her dressing room?” I asked an attendant at the staff entrance, a large bouquet of flowers in my hand.

Indeed, I was back at the Théâtre d’Art. Popular actresses often received gifts from fans and supporters, you see. And clad in men’s clothes (which I’d procured from a second-hand shop in town) with my hair hidden under a cap, I looked like a thoroughly convincing flower shop errand boy.

I had tried the front entrance first, and as expected, a jostling crowd of curious onlookers had congregated there. The portion of the warning that threatened “when all curtains on the stage fall” presumably referred to the end of the play’s run, so it wasn’t likely that Lutin would appear today. Despite this, throngs of people had converged to try and get a look at the painting. Perhaps because so many employees were diverted to deal with that, I was able to deliver the flowers personally rather than being asked to hand them over.

When I knocked on the door I was instructed to, I received an immediate response from inside. Struggling with the oversized bouquet, I announced myself and opened the door. “I’m from Littre Flowers. One of our customers ordered these sent to you.”

Repositioning the bouquet in my hands, I poked my head out from behind it. The dressing room was rather small, less than half the size of my own at home. A little surprised—*Is this it?*—I beheld the woman sitting before the mirror. With her long, brown hair, she definitely resembled the model from the painting.

She turned her head to face me. Her distinctive large eyes gave her a truly glamorous beauty. Her dress, sophisticated with a bold floral pattern, suited her nicely. Despite her bountiful bosom, her waist was surprisingly slender, making her look far younger than her years. If put next to someone in their twenties, I’d probably have been able to guess that she was older, but that was only because

of her mature charm. My impression was that she had only grown more beautiful with age, not less.

“Thank you,” she said. “Put them over there, please.”

The voice I’d heard from the stage last night sounded kind and friendly, so it was no surprise that she wasn’t the type to be haughty toward an errand boy. I put the bouquet down where she indicated. Grace then stood up and walked over. Now that she was standing so close, I could tell that her eye color didn’t match the painting. Hers were a bluish shade of green—similar to Prince Liberto’s, but darker.

She took the card from the bouquet. “Goodness,” she uttered quietly. “Marielle Flaubert. Of House Flaubert, I assume. I did hear that the future earl and his wife were here last night, but I’m surprised they would even notice me with all that commotion. I was completely upstaged. How lovely to show such concern for me.”

She seemed so happy that the pangs of guilt hit me hard. I certainly couldn’t tell her this was only an excuse to get inside the theater. *My feelings of support and encouragement are genuine, though, I swear! I’m sorry—next time I’ll bring something better!*

“Such pretty roses. Pure white. The autumn roses are out of season by now, so these must have been grown in a greenhouse.”

“That’s right.”

I’d wondered if some eye-catching red or pink roses would have made a better gift for an actress, but I had a feeling that white ones would suit Grace better. White alone would have seemed a little desolate, of course, so they were supplemented by smaller flowers in brighter colors. I’d bought them from a flower shop that I’d suspected would have them even at this time of year. Indeed, I had even prepared the card in advance, claiming to be my own errand boy. *No one will ever suspect. The perfect deception, if I do say so myself.*

“I was expecting this evening’s performance to be derailed as well, but knowing that I have such support from fans, I’ll have to do my best.”

“Yes, I guarantee that there are people looking forward to your

performance.” I found the pitch of my voice creeping up, so I forcibly lowered it again. “I’m a fan of your acting and singing as well, in fact.”

“Oh, you’ve come to watch me?”

“Yes! Up in the cheap seats, of course. I couldn’t see you very well from so far away, but I could hear all your lines, and I was entranced by your strong, resonating singing voice!”

“Thank you.”

As I spoke in a feverish haste, nearly giving myself away, Grace smiled cheerfully. Perhaps she thought I was simply nervous at meeting my favorite actress. She returned to the seat in front of the mirror and picked something up from among the large assortment of cosmetics and brushes.

“I’m only playing a supporting part this time, so my role isn’t very prominent, but feel free to come and watch if you like. The lead actress has a fantastic singing voice too.”

She presented me with a ticket envelope. If actors had seats reserved for them, they would surely be for their patrons. I hesitated, unsure of whether it was all right to take such a thing, but Grace pushed the envelope into my hands.

“It’s perfectly fine. The tickets are going spare. A long-time patron of mine recently passed away, you see. These were returned to me.”

“What a shame. Someone could have come to see the play rather than returning the tickets.”

At this, Grace shook her head. “They live abroad, so it’s not really practical. He was such a curious man. He started supporting me when I was still a novice. He only came to the theater on rare occasions, though. Mostly, we communicated via letters.”

“He must have been quite taken with you.”

“Seemingly, yes. We only met on rare occasions, but he was really good to me. His surviving family has told me that they’ll be cutting off that support, however.”

“That’s not very nice of them,” I said, sounding more reproachful than I had

intended.

“It is what it is,” Grace replied. “I’d expect nothing less upon the passing of a patron. It’s all right, though. Even now that he’s gone, I can still perform. I’m employed by the theater, so it’s not as though I’ll lose my income. I’ll just have to do my best to draw someone else’s eye.”

Her upbeat smile showed no hint of any bitterness. I sensed a strength in her, a desire to not drag this around forever or let it get her down. Now that I’d had a chance to speak with her, she seemed good-natured indeed.



“My only regret is that I haven’t had any leading roles lately, so I hesitated to even invite him. I should have sent tickets much sooner. Now all I can do is visit his grave.”

“I’m sure he’s looking down and supporting you still.”

“Thank you. Actually, with all this fuss, I doubt the final performance will run as normal. In that sense, it’s almost a relief that he won’t be here to see it.”

This reminded me of the reason I’d actually come here. *Dear me! I almost delivered the flowers and left without learning anything.* Reminding myself of my mission, I put the current topic aside for now.

“There certainly are a lot of people outside the front entrance,” I remarked. “There must be journalists among them too. I bet that’s annoying. I had a look at the papers. As far as I can tell, the painting looks a bit like you, but otherwise none of this has anything to do with you, does it?”

“Indeed. It’s just a painting the manager bought,” she replied after a pause. Did she know that the model was her mother, perhaps?

“I wonder why Lutin’s after it. If he’s a fan of yours, he could just buy a photograph.”

“Who can say? I don’t know for sure, but I doubt he’s a fan.”

Grace pulled an open jewelry box toward her and closed the lid. It looked rather old, with the flowers painted on the lid mostly worn off.

“I’m doubtful as to whether it’s the real Lutin to begin with,” she added. “It’s more likely an ill-natured prank.”

“I suppose so.”

“I don’t mean to cast aspersions, but there’s someone here I’d believe capable of setting up something like that.” Suddenly, she turned to look at me again. “Sorry, can you forget I ever said that?”

Her face indicated she regretted the words leaving her mouth. *No surprise there. If word got out, the gossip rags would have a field day with it.*

“I haven’t given it any sort of serious consideration,” she insisted. “It just

slipped out of my mouth. There's no basis to it or anything."

"I'm a humble errand boy from a flower shop. Don't worry. I'm not a reporter." I gave her my best comforting smile. "When I talk to people while making deliveries, I always forget what we discussed right afterward. Besides, Lutin is a famous master of disguise. If he wanted to pretend to be someone who works here, he could do it in his sleep. It's shocking how perfectly he imitates other people's appearances!" I paused, then clarified, "Or so I've read in the papers!"

"Thank you for the reassurance," Grace said with a grin. I laughed awkwardly in response.

I must be more careful! If I keep running off at the mouth, I'll dig my own grave. It's unnatural for an errand boy to stick around for so long anyway. I really should be going...but I want to get just a little more information out of her.

Hesitantly, I began, "The painting's been put in storage so it doesn't get stolen— isn't that right? Were the police contacted as well?"

"They arrived before we could call them. They even said they'd take charge of the painting, but I don't know what actually came of it."

Had they come running at the mention of their long-standing nemesis, Lutin? To be honest, I didn't trust them with this at all. I would have preferred the military keep hold of the painting. *Would Lutin be able to steal it from them too, though? The only place it would truly be safe is with Lord Simeon.*

I couldn't say any of that, however, so I merely replied, "That sounds like a relief." This seemed like the right time, so I drew our conversation to a close. "I'm sure the public will lose interest in the whole mess soon enough, so ignore all the extra attention and perform your heart out. Thank you for the tickets. I'll definitely come and watch!"

"Thank you kindly. By the way, those seats require formalwear. You'll have to wear a dress next time."

I froze for a moment, dead silent. Then, without even a word of goodbye, I left with my head lowered and my mouth forming a stiff smile.

I can't believe it. The flower shop staff and the attendant at the theater door didn't notice a thing. I suppose Grace is a professional at her craft. When did she see through me, I wonder? Right from the start? If so, I'd better avoid being seen by any other actors.

Just as I was thinking that, a young woman appeared farther down the corridor and cast a sharp glance my way. I turned to face the door again as if saying goodbye to Grace, then closed it with my back to the woman. She apparently didn't find me suspicious after all. She hurried past without a word and entered another room nearby. The sound of the door slamming shut echoed down the hallway. A conversation ensued, so I presumed someone had already been inside.

She must just be in a foul mood. Relieved, I started walking back the way I had come. *She's an actress as well, now that I think about it. She looks quite different without her makeup on, but she's actually the one playing the lead role at the moment.*

Right as I was about to walk past the room she'd entered, I heard something hit the other side of the door. I jumped with a start and stopped in place. Was there a fight going on in there—or worse?!

"I absolutely hate this! This huge crowd of gawkers—I can't stand them! How are we supposed to put on a play like this?!"

That was definitely the actress I had just seen. She was speaking so loudly and clearly that I could hear every word from where I stood. I put a hand to my chest, relieved the situation was nothing like I'd feared.

Then, after a surveying glance to make sure no one was around, I put my ear up to the door. *Time to get some information! Hope you don't mind!*

The angry voice continued to rant, "Tonight's performance is sure to be a mess anyway! No one will pay any attention to the story or my singing. I can't go on like this!"

I could hardly blame her. The shouting actress finally had a lead role, and now it was overshadowed by all of the hubbub. It was only natural that she'd be upset, and I had deep sympathy for her.

“It’s all Grace’s fault! That woman planned this!”

She declared as much so loudly that I’d have caught it even without my ear pressed to the door. My head whipped around to look behind me. *We’re so close to Grace’s dressing room. Isn’t she worried about being heard? Unless she’s doing it on purpose and she wants to be heard. And is she merely badmouthing Grace, or is there some basis for her accusation?*

I suppressed my aura even further and concentrated on the voices in the room.

“You mustn’t throw baseless accusations around like that. Imagine if someone heard you.”

The actress scoffed. “Everyone’s thinking it; they just don’t say it. What other explanation is there? I got suspicious as soon as the manager hung up that completely run-of-the-mill painting. So it looks like Grace—why does that mean he has to put it where everyone can see it? Nobody wants to look at it, much less steal it. Lutin only targets valuables. Do you really think he’d go after *that*? Don’t make me laugh! It’s a big load of balderdash. A ruse to generate press. All so the manager can glue everyone’s eyes on Grace.”

A similar suspicion had occurred to me previously. Did the other actresses and employees think the same? It did *seem* like a plausible explanation when all the facts were lined up, so it wouldn’t be too surprising for them to jump to that as a foregone conclusion. Though after seeing Mr. Blanche’s reaction and Lutin present on the scene, I still had plenty of doubts. Without my insights, however, the lead actress had apparently decided the whole thing was a setup.

The other person in the room with her replied, “She would have known that putting up that warning during the performance would ruin it. I can’t believe she would do such a thing.”

“Don’t you see? She *wanted* to ruin it! She hasn’t been cast in a lead role in ages and barely appears in this production too. This was all an act of revenge.”

“Are you sure? That’s a little hard to swallow.”

“Are you saying you’re on Grace’s side?”

“No! Hardly. I agree it’s suspicious. Only, I’m not sure Mr. Blanche would go

along with something like that. He'd spurn anything that interfered with the performances."

Then came more sounds of things crashing about. The actress was venting her anger on the items in the room.

"I bet Grace cried and begged him until he helped her. As long as audiences keep coming, the manager doesn't need to care what happens on stage. Tonight's house sold out in no time flat. We'll likely be packed to the rafters up until closing night. I bet he's tickled pink at the profits he's raking in."

"I don't take Blanche for that sort of man."

"I'm disillusioned with you too. I thought you were an impartial person who didn't show favoritism. He and Grace planned this, I'm sure of it. His lover came begging and he did whatever she said. Disgusting."

Excuse me? The word "lover" took me slightly aback. Weren't Mr. Blanche and Grace father and daughter? My question was soon answered as I kept listening.

"They pretend to be family, but they're not related by blood," the actress asserted. "The truth is they're a couple."

"Oh, I've heard something like that. She was the child of a theater worker who passed away in a fire years ago. Blanche took her in, didn't he? It's tough to believe he'd take the child he raised himself for a lover."

"From a man's point of view, it's the ideal scenario, isn't it? Although now his ideal woman is over thirty and past her prime."

No matter how upset this actress was, that was going a little far. *I* was the one disillusioned with *her*. How could a popular performer, one who looked so sweet and had such a lovely singing voice, be this sort of person? *Not that I'm one to judge when I'm eavesdropping at the door.*

There was an interesting nugget of information here, though. Grace wasn't Mr. Blanche's flesh and blood, but rather his adopted daughter. *Only...if we assume the model for the painting is Grace's mother, does that mean she has no direct connection to Mr. Blanche? She wasn't his wife after all? Or could Grace be a child from a previous marriage?* The more I learned, the less it felt like I

knew. I wished I could walk straight into the room and ask them for more details.

“I don’t buy the story about Mr. Blanche just happening to find that painting and buying it on a whim. He must have had it commissioned in Grace’s likeness. I’ve seen the necklace in the painting. Grace has one just like it.”

“Oh, really?”

“She showed it to me once. She said it was a memento of her mother. The stone is a different color, but the design is identical. That’s why I’m certain Grace was the model for that painting, and they changed the fine details just enough to make it look like a different person. You see? It’s all lies from start to finish, and the manager is in on it. *The Violet Lady* indeed. Pah.”

“Hmm, maybe.”

I heard movement inside the room that I soon realized was footsteps headed toward me. I frantically moved away and scurried toward the exit, careful to avoid making any noise. The door opened behind me and people emerged. I surreptitiously turned my head to look. The actress was walking the other way down the corridor with her hands full, accompanied by an assistant carrying even more. It didn’t seem as though they would notice me, so I slowed my pace. Wondering if I had actually gained any new knowledge or simply gotten an earful of ill-natured gossip, I ambled along.

Putting aside the theory about them being lovers, Grace having an identical necklace might be a key detail. If it’s a memento, that would suggest that her mother is already dead. Does that mean Mr. Blanche isn’t searching for Grace’s mother, but someone else? If so, who could it be? Maybe the notion of him searching for a missing person was mistaken all along.

Nothing I’d learned unraveled the mystery at hand. It only added more baffling layers. Did Lutin and Prince Liberto even have anything to do with this case? It still seemed possible, but it grew less clear with every new detail I uncovered.

When I glanced around, wondering if I might be able to ask or overhear anything else before going on my way, there didn’t happen to be anyone conveniently nearby. *I suppose the staff are all busy dealing with the chaos at*

the front entrance, and it's too early for the actors and such to be rushing around. I couldn't hear any voices from the dressing rooms either.

Just as I was about to admit defeat and head home, a round-shouldered man in a tattered suit appeared, walking toward me. Despite my momentary hopes, he didn't look like an actor, and I didn't think he was a staff member either. He was nonchalantly walking around, turning his head to look everywhere. He was doing the same thing I was, in other words. *A plain-clothes police officer, perhaps? I had better look like I'm supposed to be here.*

I put on an unconcerned air and moved to walk right past him, but when I glanced at the man's face, he noticed me and cast a sharp glare back. Pausing, he said, "Who might you be, lad?"

Reflexively, I replied, "You're not a police officer *or* a theater employee, are you? Aren't you a reporter from *La Môme*?"

The man's eyes widened and he let slip a shocked gasp. Indeed, after getting a look at his face, I recognized him. This was the same gossip columnist who had been staking out Satie Publishing! I'd seen him hanging around in front of our secret apartment as well. I'd know him anywhere. Clearly, he'd come to dig up what he could about this kerfuffle. Did that mean Lutin was a juicier story than female authors?

I cocked my head in puzzlement. "How did you get in here? I thought no reporters were allowed inside."

In a fluster, the man put a hand over my mouth. I could smell the stench of tobacco smoke on him. "Shh! Who are you, anyway?" he demanded. "How do you know who I am?"

From how he was acting, he must have sneaked backstage. *This is why one can never be too careful. A reporter will use any trick in the book to get a scoop.*

"You don't work here either. Are you an errand boy from some shop or other? Go and leave me in peace. I'll pay you off."

After a few muffled shouts into his hand, I shook him off. "Let me go! Stop touching me!"

"Shh! Be quiet, I said! I'm not doing anything wrong. I came to see what the

situation was like here, that's all. I'm not a burglar, just a newspaper reporter as you said."

Shouting further would only make him act rashly, so I lowered my voice and replied, "Sneaking in is wrong in and of itself, isn't it? You wouldn't be panicking if you weren't worried about getting caught."

"Shut your mouth. I can't always get the information I need by politely knocking on the front door. Uncovering the truth means taking a few brave risks now and again."

Uncovering the truth?! His paper's articles were so embellished that they were practically invented out of whole cloth. Not to mention that all he'd done was sneak in while nobody was looking. Comparing that to courageous and daring behavior was laughable.

Of course...I've done exactly the same thing. I'm not really in a position to criticize. Besides, this could be useful for me.

Lowering my voice even further, I asked, "Don't worry. I won't cry for help or anything. I'm actually highly interested in the warning message from Lutin myself. Have you learned anything from searching inside the building?"

The man's expression changed to one of contempt, as if he'd decided I was just another curious member of the public. He shrugged his shoulders and moved back from me. "Sadly, I only just got here. You look like you're on your way out, though. Did *you* see anything while you were here? If you've got anything juicy, I'll make it worth your while."

I hadn't *seen* anything, but I'd heard rather a lot. The kind of stuff that would make a gossip columnist jump for joy, in fact. Naturally, though, I feigned ignorance. "I was only here for a delivery. I spoke to one of the actresses a little, but she didn't seem to know any details. Oh, I suppose she did say that the police would be taking charge of the painting."

"The police? Hmm, that's strange. It looks to me like the police only just arrived. I saw them having some kind of argument at the entrance."

"Just now?" This didn't seem to fit. According to Grace, the police had come straight away without even being called. Why would they be arguing by the

entrance now? “When did you see them specifically?”

But before he had a chance to answer my question, the reporter’s whole countenance changed and he held up a single finger in front of me. Recognizing the silent instruction to be quiet, I listened intently. Footsteps were headed our way.

“Sounds like someone’s coming,” I said.

“Damn! We need to hide. Is that door unlocked?”

“What? There might be people inside.”

“If there were, they’d have come out by now. We’ve been talking here for a while.”

The reporter pushed me aside and put a hand on the door behind me. Despite his professed confidence that it was empty, he opened it ever so gingerly, not making a sound, and peered inside. Once he was sure, he slipped inside, beckoning for me to join.

I hurried after him. This looked to be another dressing room, but I couldn’t see any personal items lying around, suggesting its occupant had not arrived yet. Rather than closing the door fully, the reporter left it open a crack and looked out into the hall. I put my face to the doorway as well, my head below his.

“This has only just occurred to me, but what if they’re coming straight to this room?” I asked.

“Don’t tempt fate like that,” he scolded me.

Something else that belatedly occurred to me was the fact that I had no reason to hide. Only, it was too late for me to rush out now, so I had no choice but to stay hidden. The footsteps rapidly drew closer. Whoever was coming was walking at a rather quick pace.

“Only one person,” the reporter said. “If push comes to shove, that should be manageable.”

“You mustn’t resort to violence! If we’re caught, we’ll just have to apologize. Knocking them out and leaving them unconscious would be absolutely

unthinkable.”

“You’re the one who thought of it! I meant that we’d be able to run away. Anyway, shh!”

The person in question finally passed by in front of us. We watched on, both holding our breath. It was a man in a police uniform. He walked straight past, but from my vantage point, I could see that he was holding a rather large package under one arm. The reporter and I exchanged a glance.

He began, “That must have been...”

“The painting, yes,” I replied. “The size and shape looked exactly right.”

“You saw it when it was hanging up?”

“I did. Was that the police officer taking charge of the painting, then?”

“Definitely not!” Firmly denying my speculation, the reporter stood up and put a hand on the door handle. “A police officer wouldn’t be moving around on his own. They always work in teams. That’s especially vital if they’re taking charge of goods being targeted by thieves. Whatever’s going on here, it smells fishy!”

“Wait!” I cried.

But before I could stop him, he opened the door and flew out into the corridor. *Honestly, aren’t you worried about being caught?* Dumbfounded, I poked my head out to see what happened.

The reporter ran after the man in the police uniform and shouted, “Hey, you! Where are you taking that painting?”

Shocked, the other man turned his head to look. The very next second, he picked up the pace and ran off.

“I knew it! That’s Lutin! This’ll be a scoop and a half! Now get back here!”

Forgetting that he was supposed to be discreet, the reporter gave chase. I followed, wanting to cry, *That man’s much shorter than Lutin! He’s a thief, but he’s definitely not Lutin!*

The reporter was pretty light on his feet. He caught up to the man, and in the

altercation that ensued, the package fell to the ground. The wrapping came off to reveal what was inside. *I knew it!* I ran over and picked it up. “This is *The Violet Lady*! There’s no mistaking it!”

With the impact of hitting the floor, the frame had come loose and the backing board had slipped out of place. When I turned the painting over to make sure the art itself wasn’t damaged, something fell out.

An envelope? Was there a letter hidden inside the frame?

The reporter let out a strained cry of pain. When I looked up in shock, he was sprawled out on the floor, not moving a muscle. A chill ran down my spine. *No. He... He can’t be...*

The thief turned to look at me. He was a young man, likely still in his twenties. His gaze was piercingly sharp—enough so that I could believe he would kill a man. The feeling made me tremble with fear. When he reached out and took the painting back from me, I was powerless to stop him. Nor could I run after him as he dashed off. I simply stood rooted to the spot and watched him go.

Remembering the man lying on the ground in front of me, I hurriedly knelt down. “Are you all right? Speak to me!”

As I shouted, I gave him a proper look over. He didn’t appear to be bleeding, nor were his clothes torn. When I drew my ear to his mouth, I could hear regular breathing. He had been knocked out, nothing more. I heaved a huge sigh of relief.

Thank goodness, I thought, still shaking. I feared I’d witnessed a murder.

If he’d hit his head, I decided it would be best not to shake him, so I left him alone and picked up the envelope. It was quite odd for a letter to come out of a picture frame. I wondered what it might be about. Just as I was about to look for an address on it, frantic footsteps approached.

“I heard voices over this way!” someone cried.

“He ran out through the back door!” came another shout.

These had to be theater workers who’d noticed the thief. The footsteps multiplied. My first thought was that this was perfect—I could tell them all

about the thief. Then I realized how bad the situation could be for me.

If they ask me for information, will I have to reveal my identity? I'm not sure they'll believe I'm a flower delivery boy who just happened to be here. Would Grace vouch for me? If it were me alone, I might be able to manage it, but how do I explain a reporter passed out on the ground? What if he wakes up while I'm saying I've never met him and I was just passing by? What if he starts arguing with me, and then the real police come along and start confirming identities? They could inquire with the flower shop and ask if they have an employee of my description. Oh no, this is not good—not good at all! I'd go so far as to say it's absolutely disastrous!

If I were to be discovered here, I'd be facing far more than a mere lecture. For the future lady of House Flaubert to be caught disguising herself as an errand boy would be the scoop of the century. I set off running toward the exit forthwith. I had to leave the reporter to the incoming crowd. *I'm sorry, but I have no choice! I have to save myself!*

A voice rang out behind me. "I hear footsteps! Who's that?!"

Does he mean me? No, you've got the wrong person! I'm not the thief!

"Just some kid. The thief was dressed as a policeman, wasn't he? Hey, someone's passed out on the floor!"

"That doesn't matter! Catch him!"

What do you mean it doesn't matter? Don't come after me! If you know the thief is pretending to be a policeman, chase him instead!

Too busy running to answer the tumult of voices behind me, I fled through the back door. From there, I ran back to the main street as fast as my legs would carry me. *What am I going to do? If they catch me, I'll be front-page news! There must be somewhere I can hide.*

Apologizing to everyone I bumped into, I pressed my cap to my head as it threatened to fly off. I kept my eyes peeled as I flew. I was already out of breath. At this rate, I was going to exhaust all my energy before I had a chance to hide. Just as I was about to cry wondering how I would possibly get out of this mess, a large carriage drove past on the road beside me. An omnibus. The

second I saw the long vehicle packed with passengers, it struck me that this was my chance.

Straining vocally with the effort, I mustered the last of my strength and chased after the carriage. The handrail and rear deck were right in front of me. Reaching out, I just barely managed to grab on. Half dragged along for a moment, I managed to hoist myself up onto the deck.

I did it. I did it!

Wheezing painfully, I stood there and tried to catch my breath. Despite my frantic efforts to catch up, the driver had not stopped for me. In Sans-Terre's crowded city center, people chasing down missed omnibuses was an everyday sight.

Once I had recovered enough to raise my head, I cast my eyes over the street behind me. There was no sign of any pursuers. Either I had successfully shaken them off, or the real thief had distracted them. One way or the other, I was so relieved I nearly slumped to the carriage floor.

That was when it occurred to me. *Did I have to run away at all? I should have just pretended I was chasing the thief as well, and said, "He went that way!" I could probably have exited during the confusion and blended in among the crowd outside.* How silly of me. My own idiocy made me feel faint, frankly. What in the world was I doing?!

"I cannot believe this," I groaned, dejected. "I truly am a fool."

My panic clouding my judgment, my guilty conscience had told me I *had* to run away. *I'm simply not cut out for this kind of skullduggery.*

The omnibus's back door opened and the conductor came out. With a suspicious tone, he asked, "Well, lad?"

"Oh, pardon me!"

When I let go of the handrail and went to reach for my coin purse, I realized I had been clutching the envelope all this time. *I didn't put it down before fleeing the scene.*

After paying my fare, I moved inside the bus. Thankfully, there was a free

seat, so I took it. My body was caked in sweat. Wiping my forehead with a handkerchief, I glanced down at the envelope. *I have to return this to Mr. Blanche...but how on earth am I going to explain having it in the first place?*

Turning it over, I could see there was no stamp and no address. Nothing was written on the outside except “To Serena.” A Lavian woman’s name. The seal had already been broken.

For now, I smoothed it out and put it in my pocket. The carriage gradually made its way downtown, stopping occasionally to pick up and drop off more passengers. Watching the city scene go by, I considered where best to disembark. I simply wanted to get off anywhere and then hail a fiacre home. Only, that would mean doubling back the way I had already come, so I figured it was best not to do so immediately. The timing was probably an unnecessary precaution, but I couldn’t be too careful.

Where can I go to kill some time? Oh, I know! Fortunately, we had just passed by the place I had thought of—the secret apartment. *What could be a more perfect hiding place?*

With a cry of “I’m getting off here!” I did so at the next stop. My destination was so close that I could walk straight to it. Reaching the building before too long, I first paid a visit to the apartment closest to the entrance.

“Please excuse me,” I said to the elderly lady who lived there. “I’m here to clean the apartment upstairs.”

“Certainly. Here you go.”

Since I’d given her the secret code phrase, she in turn handed me the key. See, this woman had lived in the apartment building before Lord Simeon bought it and was helping us with our comings and goings by taking charge of the key. In exchange we had exempted her from paying rent, which made her very happy indeed.

“No one else has come so far today,” she continued. “Will they be joining you later?”

“No, today I’m here for a slightly different reason. I don’t expect anyone to visit except me.”

“Oh, I see. In that case, would you like a cup of tea?”

She unfortunately lived quite a lonely life. All her relatives had passed away before her, and she didn’t have any friends who came to visit. Thanks to that, she seemed thrilled that we’d started frequenting the building. After enjoying a slice of freshly baked pie and a nice chat with her, I said my goodbyes and went up to the fourth floor.

After entering the apartment, I locked the door tight and looked down at the street through the window. I spied no sign of anyone hanging around the entrance. Relieved that I hadn’t been tailed, I sat down on a chair and heaved a heavy sigh.

I am absolutely exhausted. Who would have thought I’d have a run-in with a thief?

I wondered if Lord Simeon would tell me off. His Highness had said that wherever I went, disaster buzzed around me like flies—and right now, I could hardly deny it. Nevertheless, it was only a coincidence that I had been at the scene. I hadn’t gone to the theater *planning* to witness the theft. Nothing was even supposed to happen today; it was too soon. All I’d wanted was to get an idea of the situation and have a quick chat with someone involved!

Was it possible we’d misunderstood the warning? Even if that were so, nothing about “when all curtains on the stage fall” hinted at today. This was just an ordinary day—nothing special about it. Did that mean today’s thief wasn’t the author of the warning message?

“This is all so confusing I can hardly bear it,” I said to myself. Then I noticed the rustling in my pocket at my every slight movement. “Oh!”

The letter. There it still was. I have to decide what to do with this too.

With a sigh, I pulled out the envelope. Rude as it was to read a letter meant for someone else, I decided to see what it said. If it turned out to have nothing to do with the case, I could simply mail it back anonymously. Hoping that would conveniently be the case, I unfolded the paper.

Oh, this stationery is from the Acker Company. I recognize the unique watermark. I’ve never seen paper with a pattern like this before, though.

What mattered wasn't the stationery, however, but its content. I ran my eyes over the page. The letter was written in Lavian, and the neat handwriting looked like it was probably a man's. As I read, I forgot everything else I had been thinking about.

"Oh, Serena. You are my goddess of love, the one who sets my body and soul alight. Your fair, honey-scented skin breathes new life into me even now. The time we spent together was indescribably sweet. The softness of your plump, smooth hills—and the excitement when I kissed their peaks! The arousal when I felt the heat of your wet fountain. When our heated embrace reached its fiery apex, you and I together, I knew true joy for the first time."

I stopped reading and let out a strained cry. *This is a love letter, isn't it? A very ardent one indeed! One that talks very frankly about a very intimate encounter. It reads like it was written "after the fact," no?! A letter to say, "I had a great time last night!" Who on earth penned this?!*

I almost tossed the letter away from me. *I shouldn't be reading this...but I'm so curious as to what comes next!*

"It's such a pity that we must hide from the world—that no one can know about our deep affection. Our love must be hidden from the light of day at all costs. Oh, why couldn't I have met you sooner? The hand of destiny is so cruel."

Was this written by Mr. Blanche? Serena could be the model from the painting, whom we suspect is Grace's mother. Hiding a love letter from long ago inside the frame is the kind of thing people do sometimes. Still, I'd expect it to be a love letter he received from her, not one he wrote himself. Once you came to your senses, it'd be mortifying to a fatal degree. You'd rather burn it than hide it. Or did Serena hide it in the frame herself? That doesn't feel quite right either...

The one very clear detail was that the relationship in question couldn't be acknowledged publicly. It was very possible that one or both parties were already married. The content of the letter certainly conveyed that feeling. The secrecy of their connection made the author's passions burn even more fiercely, and then this record of it had been hidden to make sure no one else saw it.

Adultery... The person who wrote this was certainly basking in their joy, but I still feel sorry for his wife (or her husband).

I recalled the mention of Grace having no blood relation to Mr. Blanche. Perhaps he had adopted the daughter of his mistress...or perhaps that was all a facade, and Grace was actually his real (illegitimate) daughter. Either way, I was ready to prematurely decide the letter had no connection to the case and could safely be mailed straight back—until I saw the signature at the foot of the page. My breath caught in my throat.

“Liberto F.”

The sender was not Mr. Blanche, but a man called “Liberto F.”

Liberto? My hands shook. Was this letter from Prince Liberto? Liberto F. — Liberto Fontana. It matches his name. But...the ages don't line up. There's no way he could have had a romantic affair with Grace's mother. Could it be unrelated to the painting? Perhaps it was being used as a hiding place and nothing more.

Was that why Lutin wanted it, I wondered? If this letter were made public, to call it an embarrassment would be an understatement.

No, that doesn't make sense at all. If you wanted to steal something back before anyone knew about it, you wouldn't put out a warning beforehand. It would be ridiculous to draw attention to the painting in such an ostentatious manner if this letter was the reason behind it all. It also leaves the question of the fake policeman who actually took the painting.

I could hardly bear it. The number of tangled threads was making my head spin. I returned the letter to its envelope and aimlessly paced around the room with it. As much as I wanted to calm down and cool my head a little, I couldn't keep my thoughts from whirring. *I'll have to consult with Lord Simeon. I cannot possibly keep all this to myself. Yes, that's what I'll do as soon as I get home.*

Pausing, I stared down at the envelope in my hand. I didn't feel at ease with it in my possession. However, I couldn't just leave it lying around either. I would have to put it away somewhere. Preferably somewhere it wouldn't be found, just to be safe.

Then I thought of the ideal place. I went through the hidden door and into the neighboring apartment, then moved the small cupboard in the kitchen. The wall behind it was damaged from years of wear. Some of the tiles had come off to reveal the bare surface underneath. The cupboard had no doubt been placed there to cover this up.

The remaining tiles were half-missing as well. I slipped the envelope into the gap between some of them and the wall. When I moved the cupboard back into place, the letter was completely concealed. No one was likely to find it, even if they searched the whole building.

Yes, perfect. This will do nicely.

I didn't want to risk anything happening to it while it was on my person, so I would keep it stashed here for now. When I needed to retrieve it, I could bring Lord Simeon along.

Satisfied with this, I went back to the room where I'd been sitting. In less than an hour, the sun would set. Once it was dark, it would probably be safe for me to leave. I'd have to return to my family home, get changed, and then hurry back to the Flaubert estate. Would Lord Simeon be home first or would I, I wondered? It seemed possible that I'd get there before him. The sun set early at this time of year.

As I waited, such thoughts running through my head, I started to feel intensely tired. I'd been rushing about all over the place since morning, including a frantic dash that had left me on the verge of collapse. With the old lady's pie and tea filling my stomach, it was only natural that I'd grow sleepy. I began to doze off in my chair...and then, it seemed, I drifted off altogether. When I opened my eyes, shivering with cold, it was pitch black outside.

"What? Oh no! How long did I sleep?"

I leaped up and ran over to the window. It didn't merely look dark out because of the light inside the room—night really had fallen. The streetlamps were all aglow.

"What time is it?"

I almost wanted to scream as I looked around frantically for a clock. Then a

question occurred to me. *Why is it still bright inside the room?*

The lamp on the table was burning, and I didn't remember lighting it. When I'd fallen asleep, it was still light outside, so there had been no need. Who else had been here? One of the editors, maybe? But surely they would have said something and tried to wake me...

A chill ran through me. With fretful caution, I looked around the room. One small lamp wasn't enough to illuminate the entire apartment. The corners remained shrouded in shadow. I trembled, feeling as though someone was hiding there, watching me.

And then—footsteps. The door flew open. I shrank back as a figure appeared before me. Was it an editor, a writer, or...someone else?

"Hello there!" he called jovially as he entered. "The sleeping princess finally awakens."

I knew that voice. That tone.

"You look adorable when you're sleeping. I hope you're proud of me for holding back on any mischief. It occurred to me that I could do absolutely anything, but I knew you wouldn't like that, so I was a good boy. Aren't you impressed?"

My mouth fell open, but all I could utter was a sound of shock. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the man approaching me. His young, handsome face surrounded by short black hair that flicked up playfully at the ends emerged from the darkness and into the lamplight.

I didn't know whether to be stunned or simply exasperated. Unable to do anything but gape like a fool, I stood stock still. Before me was the man whose name had been on my lips many times since last night, causing me no end of consternation—Lutin the mysterious thief himself.

Chapter Eight

Before saying a single word, I walked right up to him and pinched his cheek as hard as I could.

He let out a yelp that sounded genuinely pained. "Ow, that hurts! Please stop that!"

I pulled my hand away and murmured, "I'm not dreaming, it seems."

"Still, I'm flattered to think I might appear in your dreams." He rubbed his cheek with a sullen pout. "Isn't it normal to pinch yourself? You didn't have to be so cruel."

"It's your just deserts for this confusing mess. Honestly, I don't know where to start! What exactly are you up to?! Did that warning really come from you? Why are you interested in the painting? Was the actual thief a subordinate of yours? Was this all at Prince Liberto's behest?"

Now that I finally had Lutin in front of me, I had a never-ending stream of questions. I wanted to ask him about every detail. Before I could reel off any more, however, he put both hands in the air in a "hold your horses" gesture.

"If you fire off all your questions at once, I won't have time to answer," he insisted. "One at a time, please."

I narrowed my eyes. "If I ask you one question at a time, will you answer them?"

"That depends on the question," he replied with a faintly mocking smile, leaving me decidedly unsure as to whether he meant to answer a single one.

I told myself to calm down. This was not a man who ever answered anything directly. He always dodged the question somehow, neatly sidestepping anything at the heart of the matter. Expecting otherwise was hopeless.

"Then allow me to rephrase. Which of those questions *will* you answer?" I pressed. After all, what he'd said suggested that there was at least something in

my interrogation that he *was* willing to humor.

His smile deepened. “Oho, so that’s the approach you’re taking. Clever, clever! Well, to start off with, yes, I wrote the warning message. As for why...” He adopted a singsong voice. “That’s a secret!”

“You don’t have to say it like that. I’m not a child.”

“The man who took the painting isn’t associated with me. Don’t worry—I’ll get it back and see it returned safely to Mr. Blanche.”

“Excuse me?”

That response only left me more puzzled. I could readily accept that today’s thief had nothing to do with Lutin. Their methods didn’t match up at all. If someone else had stolen Lutin’s prey out from under him, of course he’d want it back, but why return it to Mr. Blanche after that? It was baffling.

“I can’t make sense of this,” I told him. “What could you possibly be up to? Does that mean, in the end, rather than the painting, you have some other goal in mind? But what? Luring out the thief who was there today, perhaps?” I shot off ideas as soon as they came to me.

In a tone of affected admiration, Lutin replied, “Very good! I’m always surprised by your acute intuition. I still think it’s a waste that you’re forced to live a boring existence as a nobleman’s wife. I’ve asked you this before, of course, but wouldn’t you rather come with me?”

“No, I would not. And my life is *not* boring, thank you very much. Now, stop avoiding the question and answer me properly. Are you saying I’ve guessed correctly? Who was that other thief?”

As I repeated my questions, I remained keenly aware of the time. If it got too late, people would start worrying about me. I had to get home as soon as possible.

“I don’t mind if you only answer what you can, but be quick about it. I don’t have all day.”

“You’re being awfully demanding,” he replied in a sardonic voice as if to purposely fuel my impatience. “What makes you think I have to answer you at

all? I don't want you to dislike me, but that doesn't mean I can do whatever you ask."

I paused a moment, more surprised than I'd expected at being brushed off. "Then why are you here?"

I realized I'd been presuming that, evasively or otherwise, he would answer my questions in some manner. That if I started a conversation, he would take part in it. However, Lutin had no obligation to do so. Even the idea that we were friends was an assumption on my part. From his point of view, I might be nothing more than a contact he'd made through work. Certainly, he had professed his feelings for me and tried to woo me on many occasions, but I had refused him at every turn. What responsibility did he have to show me any generosity?

Perturbed at feeling despondent over this, I wiped such nonsense from my mind and tried asking him a different question. "What were you doing in the other room?"

If he wasn't here to speak with me, then there had to be another reason. He'd avoided waking me, so what had he been up to while I slept?

He smiled an even deeper smile than before. "This is what I truly love about you. Just to make it clear, I'm not refusing to answer you out of maliciousness. There's simply a great deal that I can't discuss at the moment. That said...if you'd be willing to make a deal, I would be able to say a little more."

"A deal?"

"Where did you hide the letter?"

I gulped in surprise, momentarily lost for words. *Of course. He was looking for the letter. My hiding place was so good that even Lutin couldn't find it.*

"I saw you pick it up—and I saw you run off with it still in your hand. I had to prioritize the painting, so I left an underling in charge of following you, but sadly he didn't see anything past you entering this apartment."

I stared back at him, still unable to speak.

"This is such an interesting place. You can move between the apartments

from inside, and there's no hint of that from the exterior. I'm highly intrigued to know why you have somewhere like this, but for now I'm worried about the letter. Will you tell me where it is?"

And here I thought I had been most careful. Realizing I'd been followed after all, I bit my lip. How could I compete against a professional? Though inevitable, it was frustrating nevertheless.

Even so, he hasn't been able to find the letter. That secret is still safe for now.

"Was that letter written by Prince Liberto?"

"I see you read it."

"I felt I had to or I wouldn't know what to do with it. Is he being blackmailed or some such? Because he left his lover behind to marry Princess Henriette?"

Lutin stared in wonder and then chuckled, sounding quite amused. "If he were being blackmailed, he's not the sort of person to sit there meekly and put up with it."

"Oh, I know." I nodded very firmly indeed. I wasn't thinking of him being blackhearted and so on. No, he was the future grand duke. He'd certainly do whatever was in his power. "Allow me to put it out there that his engagement to Princess Henriette wouldn't be dissolved based purely on a scandal like that. Their union was arranged for political purposes. Unpleasant as it may be, people will say that she should tolerate a mistress or two."

"Indeed. To add to that, careless threats could result in severe countermeasures. You should be careful too, Marielle. Provoking him could be imprudent."

"I have no intention of antagonizing Prince Liberto, but if this is going to upset Princess Henriette, I can't simply stand on the sidelines. I plan to show that letter to Lord Simeon and Prince Severin and defer to their judgment about what action to take."

"That's rather inconvenient for me."

Though Lutin had adopted a more casual demeanor, there was once again a chill in his tone. I took a step back to put more distance between us.

“You’d say that after all the trouble you’ve caused at the Théâtre d’Art? What about the inconvenience you’ve caused everyone else? I know you and your prince have your own problems to face, but you’re in Lagrange right now. You can’t simply come to another country, stir up a hornet’s nest, and then insist that everything must go exactly your way.”

“You’re quite right, of course, but I still can’t back down. Now, what shall I do? Making a woman talk wouldn’t exactly be a challenge, but I don’t care to mistreat you. I know—I’ll simply burn down the whole building.”

“What?!”

He had clapped his hands together as if he’d thought of the perfect idea, and now spread his arms out in an exaggerated gesture worthy of a stage performer. “I don’t need to *recover* the letter. Getting rid would be more than sufficient. But if I have to slink back home, sad and dejected having done neither, I’ll be facing a rather stern telling off. Hmm, yes, that’s what I’ll do. What does it matter if this old, ramshackle building gets burned to the ground? It must be slated for demolition soon anyway.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! There are people living here!”

“Then you won’t have to waste any time negotiating with them. Sounds like more good news to me.”

“Unbelievable! You scoundrel!”

“You knew that about me all along, didn’t you?”

Lutin closed the distance between us in a flash and grabbed my arms. As hard as I tried to shake him off, I could do nothing against his full strength. He pushed me back, still keeping a tight grip, until my legs collided with the chair. I lost my balance and fell onto my bottom, landing squarely in the chair again. Holding me down, Lutin drew his face closer.



“Not everyone in this world is as good-natured as you, Marielle. Burning someone else’s home to the ground is nothing to me. Still, when I’m with you, it makes me want to be as much of a gentleman as I can. So tell me where the letter is and I won’t have to start a fire.” He moved his face even closer. “Where did you hide it?”

I could feel his breath on my lips. He had an entirely different air about him than when he had merely kissed my cheek.

“Stop,” I said.

His blue eyes were staring at me so intently that looking away felt impossible. I didn’t know if he was threatening me or pushing himself on me. Either way, I wouldn’t stand for it.

“I’m not interested. Not with you!”

“You always turn me down so firmly, even though you smile at me so innocently sometimes. Honestly, you’re a cruel woman.”

I stared back at him, trembling.

“If I were always polite and well behaved, I’d always be pushed around. To think, the world’s greatest thief, pushed around by a lone young lady! I’m a thief, so I should act like it and take what I want. Maybe I’ll take you away with me right now. I feel a thrill of excitement just imagining the Vice Captain’s bitter expression.”

I wondered how truthful Lutin was being. This might all be an act to scare me into revealing the letter’s location. That said, I could well believe that he’d start a fire without a second thought. If he wasn’t bluffing, there was real danger here.

What am I going to do? I can’t get away with lying about it. Not in a situation like this.

“Tell me, Marielle—”

Before he could finish his sentence, he suddenly jerked upright and let go of me. *Is someone else here?* No sooner had I thought that than I saw a glint of light cut through the air with an audible swish. Lutin jumped out of the way of

the saber's strike, avoiding it only by a whisker.

He whistled in mock admiration. "Not bad, Vice Captain. If you're capable of sneaking up so quietly that even I didn't notice, perhaps you'd do better as an assassin than a royal guard."

Overwhelmed by relief and surprise all at once, I stayed seated and looked up. A tall figure in an overcoat stood before me. He raised his sword again, brandishing it threateningly at Lutin.

"You have no one to blame but yourself," Lord Simeon said derisively. "You were too immersed in your antics to pay any attention. Naturally, I'm unaware of any relation you have to Lavia or Prince Liberto. All I see before me is a common criminal. One I can cut down with no qualms."

"You would spill blood in front of Marielle? Oh, of course. You want to make it clear to her that this is what happens when she strays into another man's arms. You're a terrifying husband indeed."

Lord Simeon said nothing in response to this provocation. He merely stepped forward, bearing down on Lutin with a menace that suggested he truly intended to kill the man.

Lutin wasn't the sort of foe to simply allow himself to be cut down, however. He nimbly kicked off against the ground and ran over to the table. He put a hand on it—and promptly overturned it in Lord Simeon's direction. The lamp tumbled and the sound of glass shattering echoed through the room.

"Fire!" I exclaimed, leaping out of the chair. The oil had spilled onto the floor, spreading the fire with it.

Lord Simeon couldn't ignore this either. With a grunt of frustration, he stopped what he was doing and turned. Lutin took advantage of this and fled for the window.

I grabbed a cushion, hoping to use it to smother the blaze, but the growing flames left me frozen in terror. Lord Simeon took the pillow from my trembling hands and beat at the floor with it. After several furious blows, the fire went out. A scorched scent wafted across the now-dark room before the cold nighttime breeze carried it away.

Lutin had opened the window. In the dim light coming from outside, I could just barely make out his face. He was smiling, as ever. “If the Vice Captain is here, I’ll have to give up and admit defeat. Time to go and accept my scolding. Bye for now, Marielle!”

With that lighthearted farewell betraying nary a hint of compunction, he smoothly jumped from the window. *Again! This is the fourth floor!* As I stood there in momentary shock, Lord Simeon ran over to the window himself. I chased after him in a feverish haste and looked down. His cloak fluttering, Lutin ran off and disappeared into the night.

How on earth did he get down?

Lord Simeon let out a disdainful huff. It didn’t come across as frustration at his prey escaping, but his usual antipathy toward Lutin. *It seems he didn’t seriously intend to kill him after all, only to chase him off. I thought so. Of course, I wouldn’t necessarily have objected to him wounding Lutin just a smidgen today.*

“Lord Simeon,” I began softly after a moment had passed. Returning his saber to its scabbard, he turned to look at me. My eyes had grown used to the dark now and could see the stern glint in his eye. “I... Well...”

Though I wished I felt relief upon being rescued, there were so many reasons for Lord Simeon to lecture me that I felt myself hunching up. Still, there was something I had to say no matter what.

“I... I didn’t stray into Lutin’s arms! He was threatening me. I swear, there was nothing else going—”

“I know that,” he interrupted, his voice hard and cold. “I heard what he was saying to you. But you know that’s not what I want to talk to you about, don’t you?”

I hung my head. “Yes.” He hadn’t misunderstood the situation, at least, but I still had plenty of reasons to be nervous.

“It can wait until we get home. Before we leave, I’d like to soak the floor just in case. Is there water here?”

“Yes,” I replied, faltering. “There should be.”

I hurried to the kitchen and filled up a kettle. By the time I came back with that in one hand and a cloth in the other, Lord Simeon had righted the table again and cleared away the remains of the lamp. We wiped up the oil and thoroughly dampened the floor. *Now it's definitely not going to catch fire again.*

Following that, we locked up and left.

We returned the apartment key to the lady living downstairs and mounted the horse Lord Simeon had tied up out front. He set the beast running, its hooves clapping loudly against the cobblestones. When I huddled up, the wind chilling me to the bone, Lord Simeon noticed and stopped the horse for a moment. He took off his overcoat and wrapped me up in it, then held me tightly to guard against the night breeze.

He took us straight back to the Flaubert manor, not stopping at House Clarac. I asked the servants at home to send a message to my family before being taken upstairs to change my clothes. The wind had cut through me despite the overcoat, and when Joanna saw that I was practically turning blue, she dragged me into the bath. As I soaked in the steamy water, the tension finally began to dissipate.

"Honestly, what were you doing dressed like that? I had assumed you were having too much fun with your family and simply forgot the time," she fussed.

Unable to give a reasonable explanation in response to this scolding, all I could do was apologize repeatedly. Dinnertime had long since passed, so after getting out of the bath, I changed into comfortable clothing and supped alone with Lord Simeon in our private living room rather than going to the dining room.

Sitting across from my frowning husband, I couldn't muster any appetite. With a heavy stomach, I said, "I'm so sorry." I was aware that I was at fault and that a lecture from him was inevitable...and yet, I found myself giving an excuse nonetheless. "I intended to be home far sooner, but I sat down to rest just for a moment and accidentally fell asleep. I really am sorry for worrying you."

"If you're going to apologize, shouldn't you consider your actions leading up to that?" he replied flatly, tearing off a piece of bread. "His Highness told you not to stir up any trouble. You disregarded that completely."

“You know about that?” I asked in a weak tone.

“Did you honestly think I wouldn’t?”

With blue flames glaring at me, I reflexively drew back a moment before tilting my head, puzzled. “How much *do* you know? For that matter, how did you know that I was at the secret apartment?”

Lord Simeon heaved a great sigh. “Upon hearing that you hadn’t come home yet, I paid a visit to House Clarac and was informed that you had ventured into the city and not returned. At that point, I already had an inkling of where you’d gone and why. When I arrived at the theater, it was no surprise to find it in chaos. The painting had been stolen by a man dressed as a police officer, but strangely enough, a boy had also been seen fleeing the scene. I’m experienced enough by now to intuit that that was you, so then it was simply a question of where you’d fled. Since you hadn’t come home, that meant you were in hiding, and you wouldn’t have had many options. You likely wouldn’t choose the publishing office or Tarentule, as that could potentially cause problems for them. By a process of elimination, I decided you must have been at that apartment—and I was proven correct.”

Most impressive, I thought. *Lord Simeon’s skills are remarkable as always*. I especially admired how easy he made it sound. He’d predicted exactly how I would behave based on my character.

“Allow me to explain!” I blurted. “All I meant to do was get a feel for the situation at the theater and gather some information if I could. I had absolutely no idea that an incident like that would transpire while I happened to be there. That certainly wasn’t on purpose.”

“If it *had* been on purpose, a lecture wouldn’t be nearly enough,” he replied curtly to my clarifications. His face remained as stern as ever, and he didn’t so much as pause eating his meal. Though he manipulated the cutlery with elegant grace, his food vanished from his plate so quickly that he might have been shoveling it into his mouth. “I understand that you were merely caught up in the events. Only, when you saw the thief, why did you chase after him? You should have called for help.”

“The heat of the moment got the better of me.”

“And then why did you run away?”

“Impulse took me.”

Sighing again, Lord Simeon narrowed his eyes. “I’m glad no harm befell you, but it was exceptionally dangerous. I can’t imagine the man who stole that painting was any ordinary thief. The reporter who tried to catch him was apparently knocked out with a single blow. Clearly, this thief is accustomed to using force and knows exactly where to target for the most vicious effect. It’s only fortunate that he didn’t produce a knife.”

“Oh, speaking of which, is the reporter all right?”

“I didn’t speak with him personally, but after the police pressed him for information, he was able to return home on his own. The spot where he was punched will hurt for a while, but that’s all.”

“That is a relief,” I replied, putting a hand to my chest.

Lord Simeon, in contrast, wore a bitter expression. “None of this is a relief to me. When I heard about it all, it sent a chill down my spine.”

“I’m so sorry,” I apologized again.

Though my husband had already finished dining and was now sipping coffee, my hands were frozen holding my knife and fork.

“I didn’t tell you not to eat,” he remarked. “You should hurry up and do so.”

I tried yet couldn’t bring myself to eat anything at all. I thought I might at least be able to manage some of the potage, but I gave up after one bite.

“Marielle, are you not going to eat?”

“That’s enough for me.”

“You’ve hardly managed a single mouthful. Are you sure you’re feeling all right?”

“Yes. I don’t have much of an appetite, that’s all.”

He set his cup down, then stood and walked around the table to put a hand on my forehead. After a moment he said, “You do feel rather hot.”

“I just got out of the bath. I’m fine, I assure you. I’m merely tired after today.

Besides, the lady who keeps our key at the apartment building gave me some pie earlier too.”

I rang the bell to summon a servant. The maid who came was shocked that I asked for my dinner to be taken away because I couldn’t finish it. “It’s quite unusual for a mere slice of pie to fill you up, my lady. Are you certain you’re not ill? Oh, I can think of one other possibility as well.”

“It is neither. Do you think of me as some sort of glutton?”

“Unless you’re fully absorbed in your writing, you always eat three square meals a day with snacks in between.”

That’s normal, isn’t it? I think my portions are perfectly ordinary as well.

“Let’s call Dr. Bertin tomorrow,” Lord Simeon agreed.

“That is *quite* unnecessary! I’m reflecting on today’s events in my own way and feeling rather somber about them. You can’t expect me to be so indifferent that I could gobble up a meal while being scolded.”

This gave Lord Simeon a moment’s pause. “I certainly didn’t mean to lecture you as harshly as that.”

“Your face was so terrifying that I was bristling with fear.”

“Oh, really? Well, I suppose that was a reflex from being so worried about your safety. I was on pins and needles until I could confirm you were all right. In addition, when I found you, Lutin was there as well, which particularly set me on edge.” The tension left his shoulders as he heaved another deep sigh and rubbed his chin and cheeks.

That’s true. When he’s tremendously worried, he always falls into something of a foul mood as soon as he realizes that I’m safe. That he scolds me is simply a sign of how precious I am to him.

I wasn’t upset at his reaction. Merely very sorry.

“I apologize.”

Lord Simeon silently nodded. His large hand met my cheek, stroking me as if to make sure I was all right. His expression was still somewhat hard, but being enveloped by his warmth was a tender feeling indeed.

My body felt oppressively heavy, so, after once again refusing the rest of my meal, I moved to the couch and rested against a cushion.

“Perhaps you could at least eat the potage,” Lord Simeon suggested, picking up the dish from the cart the maid was wheeling away and bringing it to me.

I felt as though turning this down would only worry him further, so I started spooning it into my mouth, even though I really didn’t want to and it was mostly cold by now. *There is something very off-putting about this.*

“You should go to bed once you’re finished. We had a late night yesterday as well, and you were pushing yourself awfully hard before that too. I think you’ve developed a fever.” He sat down next to me and peered closely at my face. “Your eyes look somewhat swollen.”

“I am absolutely fine. Truly I am! I can’t simply relax and go to bed right now. We have to consider what to do about that letter, and... Oh no!”

“What’s wrong?”

I recalled mid-sentence that I hadn’t retrieved the letter from its hiding place before leaving the apartment. I’d been completely distracted by Lord Simeon’s reaction upon finding me.

“It should be all right. I’m sure Lutin must assume we took it with us. He wouldn’t *really* set the building on fire, would he?”

“What on earth are you talking about?” Lord Simeon asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I explained all about the letter. I told him both that it had fallen out of the stolen painting, and the most crucial part—that it was a love letter signed by someone I could only assume was Prince Liberto.

“Based on what Lutin said, the letter wasn’t being used to blackmail the prince. And I believe that. If retrieving the letter was their only concern, there would be no need to make such an elaborate spectacle of it. Lutin could have simply taken it. For him, that couldn’t have been much of a challenge.”

After a moment’s pause, Lord Simeon agreed, “That’s true, yes.”

“It seems to have been part of a plan to draw out that fake policeman,

so...maybe Lutin only learned of the letter in the process of chasing the thief. But then I picked it up, so he instead chased me to the apartment. If that's the case, it would imply the fake policeman's goal was the letter rather than the painting itself." I frowned. "Is something the matter?"

Lord Simeon offered no comment, so I continued.

"Hmm, what else? While it's certainly true that the prince's engagement wouldn't be rescinded even if the public were to learn that he had a secret lover, it would be a scandal nonetheless. He wouldn't intentionally leave the problem to fester."

"I'm not so sure." Lord Simeon shook his head. "We don't know that he was at the theater to recover the letter. However, it wasn't even necessarily written by Prince Liberto."

"What about the signature?"

"That isn't proof on its own. 'Liberto' is a rather common name in Lavia."

"Why would he want it retrieved at all in that case? It can't have *no* connection to him whatsoever. Lutin mentioned the stern telling off he'd be in for. I can only assume he meant from the prince."

Unfolding his arms, Lord Simeon rose to his feet. He lifted the now-empty dish out of my hands and set it on the table. Then, he lifted me up without even asking.

"Lord Simeon, what are you doing?"

"You must go to bed. You're exhausted and need to rest and recover your strength. When you're back on your feet, you'll be able to parse your thoughts more clearly."

As he spoke, he carried me toward the bedroom. Despite his forceful treatment, he handled me gently and lowered me onto the bed softly. Then he picked up the nightclothes that had been laid out for me and rested them in my lap.

"You can change into these on your own, can't you? Or should I call Joanna?"

"I can do it myself—but before that, I want to know if you've drawn any

conclusions. I won't be able to sleep if you drop the conversation partway through. Tell me."

"I can hardly draw conclusions without seeing the article for myself. I'll go and collect it tomorrow. Where is the letter hidden?"

"I'm going with you."

After all, I was the one who'd been investigating the matter. I wasn't about to be cut out at such a tantalizing juncture.

But Lord Simeon shook his head again. "I cannot allow you to go out tomorrow. Not until you're well again, in fact."

"There's nothing wrong with me. I'll be right as rain in the morning."

"No."

Paying no heed to my complaints, he made to leave the room. Unwilling to let him go, I grabbed the hem of his robe. "Lord Simeon!"

He paused a moment, muttering in a slightly irritated tone, "So very unreasonable." Then he turned around and put his hands on my clothes.

"What? Are you... What are you... W-Wait, hold on just a..." I yelped as he unfastened every button in a flash and stripped me bare.

Such dexterity! Has he been practicing? He's faster than Joanna!

"You may be my husband, but this is awfully—"

But my objection to being left half-naked was stifled as my nightgown came down over my head. *What's this? I thought things were going in a rather amorous direction, but this feels entirely different now. More like I'm a child being taken care of by a parent.*

"Now your hands."

At his urging, I reluctantly put my arms through the sleeves. I pulled my hair up out of my collar and removed my glasses, which had slid down my nose. Lord Simeon was patiently holding the bedcovers up for me, so I gave in, put my glasses on the nightstand, and crawled in.

"You pervert, Lord Simeon," I said, turning my head away with a huff.

“More vulgarity. I’d prefer it if you avoided such lowbrow language.”

I rolled over in bed, turning my back to him. He placed the soft, warm down quilt over me, plus a thick blanket to ensure that no heat would escape. Once I was snugly tucked in, I felt the bed sink slightly behind me and a large hand stroke my head, rustling my hair.

“If you really are better in the morning, I’ll take you with me—so please, tell me. Where did you hide the letter?” When I said nothing in response, he insistently added, “Marielle.”

His large frame pressed against me, adding the heat of his body. I closed my eyes and continued pretending I hadn’t heard anything. When I felt his breath on my ear, even when I felt the cool touch of his glasses against my skin, even when I felt a tickling softness on my cheek, I stubbornly ignored him. This provoked a small sigh before he disappeared from behind me. Then I felt a gentle shaking—his footsteps as he walked over to the door without saying a word.

The door opened, then closed. The room fell completely silent and I was left alone in the cold darkness. *My goodness, did he really just leave? That’s awfully sudden even for him! Is he still annoyed with me, perhaps?*

Apprehensive, I sat up in bed. When I did, I saw Lord Simeon standing in front of the door. He was looking right at me with a malicious expression.

Ack! Oh no!

“Marielle...”

I ground my teeth in frustration. *The original blackhearted nobleman strikes again.* How could I ever have expected to win against him?

Chapter Nine

Ordinarily, even when I felt somewhat peaky, a good night's sleep was enough to restore me. This time, however, I actually felt worse the next day. Even I was unable to deny it at this point. I clearly had a fever. My whole body felt heavy, and it hurt to sit up. My head throbbed sharply.

"I told you," Lord Simeon remarked. "You've caught a cold."

"How, though? I don't see how it happened."

Joanna sent a young maid out to buy some ice. Despite my insistence that my temperature wasn't high enough to warrant such a long journey, I was roundly ignored.

His hands on his hips, Lord Simeon looked down at me with an exasperated frown. "You fell asleep with nothing to cover you after working up a sweat. It's inevitable that you would catch a cold after that. You also spent hours out in the gardens the day before, and it was quite chilly then. You've been running yourself down while getting far too little sleep. Anyone would have a fever under those circumstances."

He was already dressed in his white uniform and armed with his saber at his side. When he unfolded the coat draped over one arm and put it on, his instantly transformed into a jet black visage. Both versions of him were indescribably dashing. His dignified aura made my heart pound—and my head ache. I groaned.

"But I've told you before, I've never had a cold in my life."

"You *assume* you haven't. More likely, when you were a trifle unwell, you chalked it up to fatigue or lack of sleep and recovered quickly enough thereafter to believe you were never ill at all."

"What? Surely not..."

Could that really be the case? Was my undefeated record entirely illusory?

“You’ve no need to push yourself today. Get the rest you need and leave the letter to me. I’ll show His Highness and we’ll think about how best to deal with it.”

“The issue isn’t how to ‘deal with it.’ What I’m worried about is Princess Henriette getting hurt.” I felt so sluggish that it was hard to think, let alone speak. “She’s still somewhere between hopeful longing and love. I wouldn’t want her earnest feelings to be betrayed.”

As I spoke, aware that I wasn’t expressing myself very well, a gloved finger softly came to rest on my lips. “Don’t overexert yourself. I understand what you’re trying to say, but Marielle, you must understand that Her Highness is older than you are. She will have to face the reality of her situation, even if it isn’t the ideal scenario. She’s a grown woman, after all. She accepts that she’s going to be married.”

I frowned. “Even so...”

He lowered his hand and brought his beautiful face closer to mine now. He kissed my cheeks, my forehead, and my eyelids before finally giving me a gentle peck on the lips.

“The royals, including His Highness the Crown Prince, His Majesty the King, and Her Majesty the Queen, all have a great deal of love and affection for their fellow family members. They don’t see Princess Henriette, their sister and daughter, as a mere pawn to be used for political gain. The princess has her trusted ladies-in-waiting by her side as well. She’s not some sad, lonely figure who will suffer if you do not run to her aid. Additionally, His Highness does more than simply daydream and frolic. He’s well aware of his position and his responsibilities. That being the case, you needn’t focus on anything other than your own recovery. If you’re good, I’ll buy you a present.”

“All right,” I replied after a moment.

A smile formed on his face, which was right in front of mine. His light blue eyes looked at me from behind his glasses. He caressed my feverish cheek with one of his large hands. “That said, with regard to the letter in particular, I don’t think there’s any cause for concern. Prince Liberto may be a tricky figure to deal with, but I don’t recall hearing about any problems involving women. If that

were an issue, His Majesty would have done something already. The future grand duke is also fully aware of what this marriage signifies. He wouldn't disrespect Princess Henriette like that, I'm sure."

Concluding thus, Lord Simeon left for work. I didn't think Prince Liberto would disrespect her either, but that was a different matter than growing close and forming a loving, trusting relationship with her.

Is it a mistake to think of royal marriages like I do my own? The princess is only human, after all. She's a young lady yearning for her fiancé. Still, perhaps I'm looking at this the wrong way...

My fever soon carried me again to the land of slumber, where I dreamed a great many things. Lutin and Lord Simeon appeared to me with much to say. I was fairly sure Prince Liberto was there too, and Mr. Blanche, and Grace. Perhaps I was just replaying my conversations with them in my mind. Everything blurred together into one vague flow. I couldn't remember much of anything after the fact—only that, inside my dreams, I had understood something.

When I next opened my eyes, my head felt much clearer. It also felt like my fever had receded some. The pain, as if a lead weight was pressing down on my skull, had dissipated.

"Though you are much better now," the doctor told me, "you must not overestimate your state of recovery. There are cases where a cold can develop into a more serious illness. Also, the symptoms of the early stages of pregnancy resemble those of a cold. If you make light of your condition and exert yourself too much, the effects will be dire. As a married lady, you must always be aware of this possibility."

Next to the doctor, Joanna nodded along to his words of caution, occasionally interjecting with her agreement.

"Still," he continued, "your speedy recovery is a telling sign of your youthful vigor. You should be back on your feet in no time...if you rest properly, of course."

"Yes, doctor," I replied unenthusiastically.

Dr. Bertin, who had served as House Flaubert's physician since before Lord Simeon was born, was in his seventies with a full head of white hair, but he was hale and hearty nonetheless. In his youth, he had studied abroad in Linden and Lavia to master his craft.

Remembering this, I decided to ask him something as he was putting his stethoscope away in his bag. "Doctor, you've been to Lavia before and you have friends there, isn't that right? Do you know if there's anyone in the Lavian grand ducal family, or related to them, by the name of Liberto? Other than the currently visiting prince, I mean."

He furrowed his hoary eyebrows in a befuddled look. "In Lavia, you say? Well, now that I recall, the former grand duke was also a Liberto."

I paused. "The *former* grand duke?"

"Yes, indeed. Liberto I. I've heard he passed away just recently."

I knew it, I murmured internally. Thinking about it, it wasn't uncommon for members of the same royal or noble family to share names. Children and grandchildren often inherited their given names.

"How old was he? Do you know?"

"Hmm. A tad younger than me, I believe."

"What was he like?"

"Let me think. He abdicated rather early, actually. I heard it was because of his rheumatism. He was afflicted from a young age, and it progressed to a point that it hindered his everyday life. It not only causes deformation and pain in the joints, but also fatigue and—"

"What about his private life?" I interjected with just a moment's hesitation. Of course the doctor was concerned with the man from a purely medical perspective, but I was interested in a different aspect. "In particular, I'm wondering about relations with women."

He looked stunned. "Well, I couldn't say. I've heard various rumors, but the common people wouldn't know the details of such a private matter."

Apparently not one to gossip himself, the doctor promptly cut our

conversation short and presented some medicine. Addressing Joanna rather than myself, he said, “Have her take this after mealtimes and if her fever returns.”

And with that, he took his leave. After I thanked him and bid him goodbye, a maid quickly went off to fetch me something to eat. I requested that Joanna retrieve a pen and notepaper from my study.

“Weren’t you listening to the doctor?” she argued. “You must rest until you’re fully recovered.”

“It’s not to write a novel. I merely think that writing some things down will help me organize my thoughts. Oh, and could you bring some letter paper and an envelope as well?”

“Honestly, my lady...”

Despite her thoroughly displeased expression, Joanna did as I asked. As I ate the apple the other maid brought me and took my medicine while leaning against several piled up cushions, I jotted down all the information I had obtained so far.

Lord Simeon was right. My life has been complete chaos over the past several days. I was making myself ill without realizing it. I should have started by writing everything out like this, and then only acted after I’d sorted through all the information.

Joanna kept a close watch over me as I ran my pen across the page. As lethargic as I was, my mind was clear and sharp owing to how much sleep I had gotten. I listed all the events thus far in chronological order. Once I had done that, I took notes in the spaces between them. I included what I knew, what I didn’t yet know, and points on which I could speculate. It was just like studying. As I organized my thoughts on paper, I gained clarity of mind as well.

“Chouchou, don’t sit there,” I said when my cat climbed up and plopped down in my lap. “I won’t be able to write.”

I had neglected her all day yesterday, so I didn’t want to chase her away. I pulled my paper free—she had pinned it underneath her—and reread my notes as I stroked her with one hand. By now, I had a relatively clear picture, but there

were still a few loose ends that didn't come together neatly. There were also elements that were largely hypothetical with very little in the way of concrete evidence. I switched over from the notepaper to proper stationery. Chouchou remained unperturbed even when I rested it on her back.

"My lady," Joanna admonished, glaring at me from my bedside. It seemed I had overstayed my reprieve.

"Just a little longer. I'll go back to sleep once I've written this."

Putting all my questions down at once wouldn't be most effective anyway, so I kept my letter to the bare minimum. When I was finished, I sealed it away in an envelope. "Please have this delivered to Mr. Blanche, the manager of the Théâtre d'Art. It mustn't be sent by post, but handed to him directly—as quickly as possible."

"If I agree, will you please go to sleep?"

"Yes, absolutely. Look, I'm going to sleep right now."

When I lay down of my own accord and wrapped myself in the blanket, Joanna took away the cushions and arranged my pillows for me. "Your husband and the countess are worried about you as well, you know. If you don't listen and continue to overexert yourself, they're sure to scold you."

"I told you, I'm going to sleep now! Oh, can you ask Lord Noel not to visit me? I'd hate to pass this on to him."

"Yes, certainly, my lady. Now, I'm going to arrange this delivery, so please get some rest."

With the envelope in hand, Joanna left the room. Chouchou, meanwhile, came under the covers and snuggled up with me, purring pleasantly. She had already finished making the rounds of her territory and sparring with rats, so she seemed to have decided now was a perfect time for a catnap.

As I stroked her fluffy fur, drowsiness overcame me. Apparently even the long hours I'd already slept were not enough. My body was no doubt pushing me to get as much rest as possible in order to recover my strength. I closed my eyes, happy to obey if it meant I'd be back on my feet even a minute sooner.

The reply to my letter came surprisingly quickly. However, since I was asleep, I did not receive it personally until that afternoon. I'd asked Mr. Blanche if he knew of a woman named Serena and whether she had any connection to *The Violet Lady*. His response was about as I expected: "Do you happen to know anything about Serena? As you pointed out, I put that painting on display because I'm seeking information about her. If you're privy to any, I'd gladly listen."

After eating a quick meal and taking this in, I put pen to paper again myself. I wrote that I'd like to visit him the following day in order to discuss the matter properly, then asked Joanna to arrange another delivery for me.

I already feel much better than I did this morning, and my temperature has gone down considerably. I'm sure by tomorrow I'll be back in tip-top shape. This time I'll visit the theater as myself, the young lady from House Flaubert. I'll bring Joanna with me as well. Surely Lord Simeon couldn't object to that.

As I was thinking about this, Lord Simeon returned to the house. It was far earlier than usual. It was still teatime, not even evening yet.

Surprised, I welcomed him home and said, "You're back rather early. Is something the matter?"

"You don't think I'd come home early out of concern for you?" Still clad in his uniform, the first thing he did upon entering the bedroom was take off his gloves and put a hand against my cheek, then my forehead. After checking my temperature, he nodded, a relieved expression on his face. "Your fever has subsided. That is great news."

"Yes, I'm feeling fit and healthy."

"Don't get ahead of yourself. You need another day's repose at the very least."

Immediately, his relief gave way to another stern-faced lecture. *That is awkward, since I want to go out tomorrow. I suppose if I ask him directly now, he'll refuse. I'll have to try a more roundabout approach.*

"I'm still highly curious about why you're home so early. I appreciate your concern for me, but I know that's not the only reason. My condition's hardly

critical enough for you to abandon your work duties.”

“It is still quite worrisome for you to be sick in bed when you so rarely take ill, even if the cause is only a cold. Nevertheless, you are correct. I’ve actually brought His Highness with me to wish you better.”

“Really? He’s gone out of his way just for that?” After a moment of even starker surprise than before, the real reason dawned on me. “Does His Highness wish to scold me as well?”

“Excellent intuition. Joanna, help Marielle get dressed.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“What? Hold on just one moment!”

Ignoring my protests, Lord Simeon left the room to wait outside. I couldn’t even pretend to fall back asleep after having just declared how much better I was feeling. Joanna got me changed very quickly. I donned a robe atop comfortable loungewear, and she arranged my hair neatly. As soon as I was ready, she called Lord Simeon back in.

“Oh no, walking makes me feel dizzy,” I claimed.

“That won’t do at all. I suppose I shall have to carry you.” Ignoring my vain struggle, naturally, he lifted me into his arms and took me into our drawing room.

His Highness raised his eyebrows when he saw us enter. “If she’s in such a sorry state that she can’t walk, there was no need for you to drag her out of bed.”

“Don’t fret. Her fever is all but gone now. She’s quite well.”

“Then why are you carrying her?”

“I wouldn’t want a relapse. If I leave her to her own devices, she’ll be rushing about all over the place.” His face said he was only stating the obvious. I pouted as he set me down in a chair.

“Overprotective as always, eh?” Prince Severin remarked.

“You say that,” Lord Simeon replied, “but what would you do if Julianne were

confined to bed?”

“Hmph. I suppose I can see your point.”

“I should hope so.”

“Of course, Julianne isn’t always prowling around in disguise.” His Highness glared at me very slightly as he made this jab. I shrank back.

Lord Simeon took a seat next to me. *How mean for two men of their age to treat me this way. I feel like a rabbit surrounded by hunting dogs.*

“Is there anything you’d like to say to me?” His Highness asked.

After a moment’s pause, I replied, “I didn’t mean to stir up trouble. Actually, I didn’t author any in the first place. I merely happened to be present when it took place.”

“Again, is there anything you’d like to say to me?”

It seemed he had no interest in my excuses. He clenched a fist and brandished it, so I simply bowed my head and apologized. “I’m sorry.”

His Highness took a breath and lowered his fist. “Well, I did have a sneaking suspicion you would run off and do something. Perhaps it was a bad idea to keep you out of the loop. Anyway, knowing you, a letter isn’t all you picked up. Did you glean any other information?”

And just like that, he had changed the subject. *Really? Is that all? That’s almost anticlimactic.* “Weren’t you going to scold me?”

“Are you that keen for me to put you through your paces? If so, I’ll gladly toss you in jail.”

“Can I take a pen and paper in with me?”

“No!” Though he didn’t use his fist, he did slap me on the head.

My goodness! I’m supposed to be an invalid at the moment, you know! Quite frankly, I feel your treatment of me is growing ever more barbarous, Your Highness.

“Wouldn’t jail be boring without anything to do?”

“That’s the entire point! You’re supposed to reflect on your actions!”

“In that case, I don’t believe it’s necessary. I already received quite a scolding from Lord Simeon yesterday. Does this mean that you came here specifically to ask me for information? If so, I’ll gladly share it with you, but it would be a little unfair for the exchange to be one-sided. I think an equal trade is in order, information for information. Have you spoken to Prince Liberto, for example?”

When I grinned up at the prince’s dashing, masculine face, the strained smile he returned twitched ever so subtly. “You really are in fine fettle, aren’t you? What a relief to have you back to your old self.”

Lord Simeon seemed as though he had a headache. “Marielle,” he began, but I cut him off.

To him, I said, “I told you all about the letter yesterday, but I didn’t have a chance to mention anything else. And indeed, there’s plenty more. Information that gets right to the heart of the case, I’d say. Don’t you want to hear it?”

Lord Simeon pressed his fingers against his head, looking deeply pained. He said nothing more, however.

Regaining his composure, His Highness answered, “By now, I’ve learned that it’s better to share information and join forces with you. Go on then. Whatever I *can* tell you, I will. Now, what would you like to know?”

This was another of the prince’s admirable traits. He could think flexibly and adjust his approach on the spur of the moment.

I suggested that our first step should be to coordinate about what we already knew. “We need an overview of the situation. Could we compare notes, perhaps?”

“Very well.”

Reluctantly or otherwise, they both agreed, so I sent for what I’d written down that morning and showed it to the gentlemen. “Much of it is still at the conjectural stage, but I’ll explain my tentative theory.”

I pointed to the first item on the page:

- *Mr. Blanche obtains The Violet Lady and displays it in the theater.*

“Lord Simeon’s theory that Mr. Blanche was trying to locate a missing person

is essentially correct,” I explained. “He’s looking for information about a woman named Serena, the model for the painting. I inquired with him and he told me as much directly.”

“I told you to sleep,” Lord Simeon muttered.

I ignored him and moved on to the next bullet point:

- *Lutin warns that The Violet Lady is to be stolen at the end of the run.*

“Mr. Blanche’s approach only made the painting known to a limited number of people. Lutin’s ostentatious warning made it famous overnight; however, I don’t think they were cooperating. I believe Lutin saw what the theater manager was doing and took advantage of it. I’ll put the question of why aside for now and move on to the next items.”

- *A letter is hidden in the frame of the painting—a love letter from Liberto F. to Serena.*

- *The day after Lutin’s warning, a man dressed as a police officer steals The Violet Lady. The aforementioned letter falls out.*

“The theft was perpetrated by a third party, not by Lutin or one of his associates. The warning message was to lure the other thief out. It’s unclear whether the fake policeman was aware of the letter’s existence or not, so his primary target was probably the painting itself. Lutin did not seem overly concerned about its loss. More like he was merely hoping to retrieve it if he could.”

I lifted my finger from the page for the time being.

“So far, there are three mysteries. Who is the man who stole the painting? Why did he do it? And what connection does he have to Prince Liberto? Now let’s add the rest of what I’ve learned.”

- *Serena, the model for the painting, seems to be Grace’s mother. She died in a fire thirty years ago.*

- *Grace is not Mr. Blanche’s flesh and blood. She is adopted.*

- *The “Liberto F.” who penned the love letter is presumably the previous Lavian grand duke, Liberto I.*

I picked up a pen and connected the people of interest with lines and arrows. Serena and Grace, Serena and Liberto F., Liberto F. and Grace.

“Serena likely had romantic relations with Liberto I and became pregnant with Grace. This makes Grace the illegitimate daughter of Liberto I—in other words, she’s the current grand duke’s half-sister and Prince Liberto’s aunt.” I shifted my gaze from the paper to Lord Simeon. “I imagine you realized this as well, no?”

After a moment, he replied, “More or less. I was aware that the previous grand duke was also named Liberto, so it followed from that.”

“You could have told me yesterday.”

“I told you that I couldn’t draw any conclusions without seeing the letter for myself. In any case, you weren’t in any state to discuss it properly.”

Twisting my face into a glower, I resumed my explanation. “Lutin’s orders come from Prince Liberto. That suggests the latter is aware of Grace’s lineage. His attendance at the theater two nights ago was all part of his plan. He must have wanted to see how events played out firsthand—and perhaps to see Grace in person as well.”

Which means he let Princess Henriette think he wanted to spend a lovely evening with her, while all along he had ulterior motives. I’m starting to feel as though he might just be using the princess. What was going through his mind as he stood next to his fiancée, who looked at him with such happy eyes, full of longing for him?

I continued, “As for why the fake policeman stole the painting, perhaps that was...to verify it. Thanks to the commotion caused by Lutin’s warning, the painting was taken down. He heard the news and wanted to look at the painting, but since it was no longer on display, there was no easy way to do so. He wanted to know for certain if it was the real *Violet Lady*, if it depicted Serena, and also if there was someone at the Théâtre d’Art who resembled Serena—namely, her daughter. With Lutin planning to steal it, there was no time to waste, so he took the chance while he could and rushed to the theater the very next day.”

I stopped and observed His Highness’s reaction. He wore a calm expression,

and had so far listened in silence without interjecting with any questions or retorts. *I wonder how much of this he already knew.*

“Go on,” he said after a few seconds.

He’d yet to share a single bit of information himself, but I could only comply. “If that man wanted to see the painting up close, we can assume he’s familiar with Serena. If Grace is the illegitimate daughter of the former grand duke, that means her father comes from the grand ducal family—but what about her mother? Serena’s origins are the key to this all. There’s likely some sort of family quarrel going on. A problem that would justify Prince Liberto’s intervention. I decided to investigate Serena further and find out about her background. To that end, I sent a letter to Mr. Blanche to arrange a meeting. He expressed interest in talking as soon as possible.”

“Frederic Blanche, was it? Is there a possibility of some relationship between this woman and the Théâtre d’Art’s manager?”

“I don’t think so. In all likelihood, Mr. Blanche is none the wiser. If he were, he would’ve gone about this differently from the start. He’s an ordinary citizen, and he’s looking for relatives and acquaintances of Serena’s without knowing any of the intricate backstory. He’s probably doing it for Grace, whose mother died when she was young and left her without any family at all.”

His Highness nodded and unfolded his arms. “I see, yes.”

Apparently having noticed that my throat was slightly dry, Lord Simeon poured cool water mixed with fruit juice into a glass for me. I gratefully took and drank it. Talking so much following a fever was somewhat taxing.

“Well done sorting out such a tangled web of a situation to this extent,” His Highness said, praising me without any hint of sarcasm. “Impressive as always.” Then, at last, he told me what I wanted to hear. “The truth is, before talking to you, we received an explanation and a request for assistance from Prince Liberto. As you discerned, Grace Blanche is the current grand duke’s half-sister.”

Somewhat surprised, I removed the glass from my lips. “The prince himself spoke openly about it?”

Perhaps that wasn't so shocking. After causing such a fuss in our kingdom, he couldn't have feigned ignorance. Prince Liberto's connection to Lutin was no secret to His Majesty, so the latter would inevitably pursue the matter, even if unofficially. Coming forward to explain himself and ask for help was perhaps the best way for the Lavian prince to avoid souring relations. In that light, it was only natural. I'd heard rumors of just how capable he was. Rather than waiting to be exposed and rushing to react, there was no doubt he was preemptively maneuvering behind the scenes.

Still, that in itself gave me pause. "What sort of justification did he give?"

"To summarize, he said he was cleaning up his family's mess." Though keeping it short and to the point, Prince Severin explained further, "After the former grand duke passed and his estate was being put in order, the family learned of his illegitimate daughter. Upon investigating, they discovered that the mother was already deceased and that the daughter herself was an actress in Lagrange. She seemed not to know about her own origins, but a painting had been put on display that might lead to uncovering information about her mother—which lines up with your story."

"Yes, indeed."

"Incidentally, the mother was no ordinary woman. She was the daughter of a man renowned as the master of all criminals who ruled over an empire of smugglers, thieves, and even assassins."

I was momentarily lost for words. *Really? I was imagining a family quarrel, and all of a sudden a criminal organization enters the scene? That is quite a twist.* "Why would the former grand duke be involved with someone like that?"

"Outwardly, he was a businessman. He also conducted respectable dealings, not just criminal ones. He had connections to influential people as well, and his daughter was even rather active in high society. That was how she met Liberto I, and the former grand duke was apparently ignorant of her identity at first. He lived his personal life in something of a free and easy manner, so he probably took her to bed without a second thought. It was only afterward that he learned she was the daughter of Scalchi—the criminal boss—and ended things with her, or so the story goes."

“My word.”

What a dramatic tale. I could picture it on stage...or even in a novel. *Oh, could this serve as fodder for my serialized story? Perhaps using something so current would be inappropriate...*

“Following that, Serena absconded. It’s been over three decades since, and recently both Scalchi and Liberto I died in quick succession. It has now come to light that Serena is gone as well, which means that the only remaining party is Grace, the child who bears the blood of both the grand ducal family and Scalchi.”

I thought hard, trying to grasp what His Highness was implying. What significance did this have for the current situation? Seeking an answer, I turned to Lord Simeon.

Cocking his head slightly, he offered an explanation. “Don’t you see? The man who came to steal the painting, successfully lured in by Lutin’s scheme—Prince Liberto’s scheme, rather—hails from what became of Scalchi’s empire. He left behind a vast fortune, and with no other children, Serena would have been his sole heir. With her gone, that falls to Grace.”

“So even crime syndicates follow proper procedures when it comes to wills?”

“His Highness mentioned that Scalchi was involved in legitimate business as well. The lower rungs of his enterprise are entirely lawless, but those at the top are educated and disciplined. However, there are differences of opinion within the organization, and there are some who wish to ignore Scalchi’s will. If those members are displeased with the lack of consensus from the higher-ups, can you guess what they might decide to do next?”

It only took me a moment to reply, “Assassinate Grace so there will be no heir?”

“Or perhaps take her into their hands. One approach would be to use Mr. Blanche as a hostage to force Grace to do as they wish. Without knowing about any of this, Mr. Blanche essentially shouted about Serena from the rooftops. He unwittingly created a precarious situation where it was only a matter of time before someone from Scalchi’s ‘familia’ came knocking.”

My mouth fell open in a silent yelp. *To think that Mr. Blanche acted so boldly purely because he didn't know any better. If he heard about this, he'd probably faint in shock.*

"I suppose it *is* a family quarrel," I said, "only the family is a crime syndicate. Except, if Prince Liberto knew about this, wouldn't it have been better to send word discreetly and protect Grace and Mr. Blanche in secret? Why create such a spectacle and draw attention to them?"

His Highness took over the explanation again. "The Scalchi syndicate started out as a militia. They were a legitimate organization at first, and they had ties to other influential players in Lavia. Even the grand duke himself. Over many long years, they devolved into the stain on Lavian society that they are today. However, crushing them is no simple matter. As we've discussed, they have a great many connections. That brings us to the current incident, which is the perfect excuse to catch them in the act and purge them with impunity. It seemed foolish not to take advantage of that, and so a plan took shape."

All I could do was sigh. While putting on such a friendly face, Prince Liberto had secretly been carrying out a highly calculated scheme. *Oh my, how enticing. It's everything I crave in a character. If only there weren't Princess Henriette to worry about... Actually, no, there's still the matter of using poor Grace as bait, so I can't fangirl over him with a clear conscience. In fact, I'm actually quite annoyed at him. Besides...*

"Marielle," said Lord Simeon, glaring at me as if he knew what I was thinking.

"Love and fangirling are separate matters," I assured him, "and you are the only one to whom I devote myself to on both fronts."

The only characters I could enthusiastically cheer for no matter how despicable their deeds were the fictional kind. I'd long learned that encountering someone blackhearted in real life provoked decidedly complicated feelings. How could I take any joy in Prince Liberto using innocent people in his plan?

Thank goodness that Lord Simeon's looks belie his true nature. The only people he ensnares with his ingenuity are nasty foes. He would never involve innocents in his designs and take advantage of them. Despite his villainous exterior, he's

extremely kind and sincere on the inside. That's why I love him too much for words and can be by his side without a hint of unease.

This also meant that Princess Henriette's apprehension was not misplaced. She had spent time in close company with Prince Liberto and sensed something not quite right. I wondered how she would take it once she learned the truth.

"I understand everything now," I said. "In the end, this means you already knew everything I had to tell you. Did I do *anything* useful?"

"Absolutely," His Highness replied. He was smiling at me with satisfaction, though I was unsure whether he'd caught my irony. "We can't simply swallow whatever the other side tells us hook, line, and sinker. Your analysis lends credence to what the prince told us while also fleshing out some of the details he didn't share. You've come in very handy indeed, I'd say. Much obliged."

Next to me, Lord Simeon extended a hand to touch my neck below my ear. *Honestly, my fever hasn't flared up at all. Don't worry. I haven't tired myself out.*

"Sorry for dragging you out of bed while you're under the weather," His Highness said.

"Not at all. I'm feeling much better already. Actually, there's one more thing. I —"

Just as I was about to bring it up, Joanna knocked at the door, peered in, and beat me to the punch. "Sorry to interrupt, but we've just received a reply to your letter."

"Thank you," I told her. "What perfect timing."

Earlier, I had asked her to inform me as soon as it arrived. I offered her my thanks again and took the envelope. I appreciated that House Flaubert's servants weren't at all intimidated by His Highness's presence. There was no nervous dithering; Joanna simply left with a curtsy.

"You mentioned that you wrote to Mr. Blanche about arranging a meeting," Lord Simeon said. "Is that his reply?"

"Yes. I was thinking of going to the Théâtre d'Art tomorrow. Is that all right? I'll be feeling even better by then. Of course, this time I'll bring Joanna with me

and use the front entrance. You can come too, if you'd prefer."

It comes down to this! I must plead as if my life depends on it! I looked up at my husband with the best puppy dog eyes I could manage. He knitted his brow, less than enthused. I gazed at him imploringly. *Please? Pretty please?*

His Highness interjected from behind me, his voice entirely displeased, "Have you considered taking a look at the letter first? You can save the obnoxious flirting for after I've left."

"You don't have to be jealous over every little thing," I replied. "You have Julianne to flirt with now."

"Not right now I don't, thank you very much! For some reason, her head has been in the clouds whenever we're together the past few days. Every time I see her and I think she's about to notice me, it turns out she's lost in thought instead. When I ask her about it, she won't tell me anything. She simply brushes me off, saying it's nothing."

"She's just crunching some numbers. I wouldn't worry about it."

I broke the seal and pulled the letter out of the envelope. As expected, the reply included an agreement to meet and a specific time. I read it out to the gentlemen and again asked if I could go tomorrow.

"Grace and Mr. Blanche must be rather ill at ease in the middle of all this furor with no idea what's really afoot. I'd like to share what you told me. Would that be all right?"

His Highness put a pensive finger to his chin. "There's nothing wrong with telling them about Grace's parentage. We should avoid revealing anything about Prince Liberto's plan as much as possible, however."

"If that's so, there's virtually nothing I *can* say."

"Then you must cancel the meeting," Lord Simeon cut in.

"Don't say that!"

Just as an argument threatened to break out between Lord Simeon and me, His Highness raised a hand to halt us. "That's quite enough. So be it. I'll leave what to say up to you, Marielle. My chief concern is that you explain the

situation in a way that avoids painting Prince Liberto and his family in too terrible a light.”

“Your Highness,” Lord Simeon replied, as if to object to this.

His liege looked back at him with a placating gaze. “I don’t deny that he’s using innocent people. But if public opinion of the Lavian grand ducal family suffers, it would be awkward for us given Henri’s position. Still, that doesn’t mean I wish to defend Prince Liberto at all costs. Regardless of her parentage, Grace Blanche is living an ordinary life as a citizen of Lagrange. She deserves our protection.”

Such magnificent words from His Highness. I love it when he acts this way.

“Incidentally, Prince Liberto is concerned about her as well. He has put the Théâtre d’Art under guard, so if danger strikes, someone will be there to take action. Keep that in mind when you talk to her.”

“I will,” I said after a moment.

Did he say “under guard”?

Despite my burning curiosity, I swallowed my questions and nodded. I doubted they’d tell me anything else at this stage even if I asked. Similarly, I pretended not to notice when His Highness and Lord Simeon exchanged glances that clearly held far more meaning than they were letting on.

Chapter Ten

After a full day's rest, I was perfectly recovered. Lord Simeon still looked worried, but once I saw him off, I started getting ready to go out myself. I'd arranged an appointment with Mr. Blanche just before lunchtime. This time I would be presenting myself as the respectable wife of a future earl, so I opened the door to my dressing room with great enthusiasm.

"Which dress should I choose? It must be as easy to move around in as possible, and wholly inconspicuous, and..."

"Are those really the factors you mean to prioritize?" Joanna interjected from behind me. "You're attending as yourself today, so you should dress like it."

She was right, of course. Wearing anything *too* ordinary wouldn't be appropriate. Browsing the rack of excessively ostentatious dresses commissioned by my mother-in-law, I selected the most unassuming one I could find.

"Perhaps this will do. It's the quietest shade."

The dress was pale purple with a hint of gray. Though the skirt looked slender, it was open in the front. During an incident this past summer, I had purposely torn the front of a newly tailored dress as it had prevented me from running. The countess had lamented at first, but then seemed as though she'd been struck by a wonderful idea. I'd soon thereafter found myself the owner of new dresses that were in keeping with the latest trends while maintaining ease of movement. The underskirt was the key: thin pleats wouldn't impede my stride. The dress's slender silhouette also minimized my chances of catching it on anything, so the design was rather good overall. If only I could have done away with the train in the back, it would have been perfect, but it seemed there was no compromise in that department.

"Will you wear an overcoat?" Joanna asked.

"The weather is nice today, so I suppose a shawl will be enough while the

sun's out."

"What about a necklace?"

"Oh, surely I have no need for that."

"That dress was designed under the assumption that it would be worn with a necklace. If you don't, your front will look bare."

She brought out a diamond necklace Lord Simeon had recently given me as a present. Even though it didn't suit me, it was a gift, so I felt I should wear it at some point...but with a mental apology, I dismissed it for today. As I was pondering other options, my eyes paused on the amethyst one.

The amethyst necklace in the painting was one of its defining features. In a sense, this whole case had begun with an amethyst. Recalling this, I found myself picking it up. *The color does match the dress nicely. Perhaps I'll opt for this.*

As a finishing touch, I wrapped a woolen shawl around me, and then it was time to set off. Joanna and I got into the carriage and headed toward the theater district.

When we reached the Théâtre d'Art, its front entrance was still crowded with curious members of the public. I could see several among them who looked like reporters as well. When I took Joanna's hand and descended from the carriage, I was met with quite a number of insolent stares from the surrounding crowd.

Immediately, someone approached. "Excuse me, are you visiting the theater for a particular reason? I don't suppose I could have a minute of your time to talk," he inquired.

Of course not! I thought, but when I turned around to address the man, I was temporarily taken aback with surprise. "How rude!" I said at last. "Kindly leave me alone."

"No need to be like that. I only want to ask you a few questions."

Though Joanna tried to shoo him away, he persisted, laughing flippantly all the while. I recognized this bedraggled middle-aged man. *Has fate brought us back together? I hope he's feeling better after that blow he suffered.*

The gossip columnist in question turned to look at me. He showed no sign of placing me as either the boy he'd met inside the theater or the young lady who'd been seen entering the secret apartment. Feigning ignorance myself, I said, "Who are you, exactly? Do you have some business with me?"

"Ah, pleasure to meet you. The name's Pieron. I work for *La Môme*."

He presented a slightly worn business card. Though Joanna went to decline it, I interrupted and took it, suspecting it might come in handy later. *What would I gain from turning it down?*

"Do you have some connection to this theater, young lady?"

I paused a moment. "Could I ask you to call me Mrs. Flaubert? I wouldn't say I have a connection as such, but I'm a patron of one of the performers and I've come to visit her."

"Goodness, you're married. So sorry. You're practically a child bride!"

You do realize I can hear you?! Moreover, I'm not a child! I'm nineteen years old!

As I pouted sullenly, Pieron gave a foolish laugh and continued, "Flaubert, was it? Does that make you a member of the famous earldom? For a noblewoman to go out of her way to visit in person, it must be quite an emergency."

"An emergency? I don't know *what* you're talking about."

"Come on, you don't need to pretend. I know there's quite a kerfuffle going on inside here. Even the police came running. Could it be that Lutin made an appearance?"

Reflexively, I exchanged a glance with Joanna. Had something happened today as well? If so, I didn't think it was Lutin's doing—did that mean it was the Scalchi familia at work? It was hard to imagine they'd carry out another burglary. All of a sudden, I grew anxious about Grace's well-being.

"Can you be more specific? What sort of a kerfuffle?" I asked.

"That's exactly my question," the reporter replied.

Evidently, pressing him was a waste of time. I took off at a brisk pace, eager to get into the theater as quickly as possible. Joanna pulled me back, however.

“My lady, please. If there’s trouble inside, it would be better to stay outside for now.”

“We don’t even know if anything’s happened,” I protested. “The only way to find out is by going inside. I’d much rather know for certain.”

Pieron agreed with me. “Yes, definitely! We should go in and check.”

“I didn’t say I would take you with me,” I replied.

“But it goes without saying! Won’t it be safer to have a man chaperone you?”

“There are plenty of men inside, thank you very much.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t get in your way. I just want to take a quick peek inside. That’s all!”

Time was of the essence and I didn’t want to spend a minute longer arguing with him. A reporter who’d caught the scent of a good story wasn’t easily dissuaded. Instead, I pretended to trip on a paver and bashed into Pieron. As casually I could make it appear, I thrust my elbow into his solar plexus. As expected, he clutched his abdomen with a groan.

He’d been attacked there hard enough to render him unconscious a few days ago, after all. Even if he had recovered by now, he was surely still sporting quite a bruise.

While the reporter was too stunned to follow, I rushed to the theater doors. An employee ran over to stop me, but I told him my name and that I had an appointment. The man turned to a colleague, a conflicted look on his face. “I, um... Hrm. I knew we’d be having a visitor, but is it really safe to let her inside right now?”

“Surely we mustn’t turn away a member of such a high-ranking house.”

“Well, no, I suppose not.”

“Could you allow me into the building, at least?” I asked, barging past them. “There’s a reporter trying to follow me.”

Pieron was up and running by this point, but I made the employees close the door behind me before he could catch up. It slammed right in his face, leaving him on the other side exclaiming some rather vulgar phrases.

Finally, I was able to rest for a moment. “Anyway,” I said, “it sounds as though something more has transpired today. What exactly could it—”

Just then, Mr. Blanche came dashing out from a staff-only passageway under the grand staircase. “My lady! I’m terribly sorry!”

It had only been three days since we last met, but he appeared to have aged significantly. The well-dressed man who’d held his head so high was now so emaciated as to look like a different person altogether. Dark circles had formed under his eyes. He must have hardly slept.

When he reached me, he apologized again. “There is no excuse for my rudeness. I’m afraid we’re facing quite an ordeal at this very moment, which has prevented me from... Well, no, I still should have sent a messenger to you. It completely slipped my mind. My sincerest apologies, my lady.”

“I don’t mind at all, so please, be at ease. I’m told the police were called again. Was there another intruder? Is Grace all right?”

Mr. Blanche nodded, then waved the employees away, telling them they weren’t needed. “Let’s go elsewhere to discuss things. I’m afraid it might be a little loud, though.”

As he spoke, he led me away. And now that he’d mentioned it, I could hear a collection of voices from deeper within the theater. I couldn’t make out anything that was being said, but among all the talking was a woman shouting as if she were involved in some sort of argument.

Opening the door to a parlor, Mr. Blanche ushered Joanna and I inside. Down the corridor, I could see people who appeared to be actors. They looked our way, but not with anything resembling a welcoming gaze. There was unease in the air.

Mr. Blanche did not join us after imploring us to sit down, but rather rushed out of the room again. He returned shortly thereafter with Grace, who brought tea with her.

“I truly am sorry for our rudeness,” she said.

“Not at all,” I replied. “I’m merely glad to see you’re safe.”

From the look of it, she was indeed well. Since it was too early to get ready to go on stage, she was dressed in simple clothes of her own, with her brown hair hanging loose. She still had all of her usual amorous beauty without a hint of the exhaustion that had beset her adoptive father. I breathed a sigh of relief. At least the worst had been avoided.

The two of them sat down across the table from us, and we were finally able to start discussing the current goings-on. It seemed today's hubbub was neither the result of violence nor theft. Rather, the dressing rooms and stage had been vandalized.

"When I locked up and went home last night," Mr. Blanche explained, "there was no sign of anything amiss. Someone must have broken in after that. When the staff arrived this morning, they found it. Costumes were torn, pieces of scenery were broken... It's rather a lot of damage, but if that were all, we could have chalked it up to mere troublemaking. Only, the culprit left a threatening letter."

"What did it say?" I asked.

He reached inside his jacket and pulled out a folded up piece of paper. When he unfurled it on the table, Joanna and I both peered down at the message. It read: "We demand the Violet Lady. If you do not comply, harm will befall people next. Be waiting in the center of the Philippe Bridge before dawn tomorrow."

For a time, I said nothing, lost as to how I should interpret this.

"*The Violet Lady* was stolen by Lutin, wasn't it?" asked Joanna. "I read about it in yesterday's paper."

Still thinking, I shook my head. "That wasn't Lutin's doing. It was a different thief."

"Then perhaps this demand *is* from Lutin?"

"After making such a show of his initial warning, he wouldn't write a letter at this late stage."

Lutin has no real reason to send a threat like this in the first place. Well, "no reason" might be overstating things, but I'm fairly sure it wasn't him.

I looked up at the father and daughter. “Just in case, may I ask if the stolen painting has been returned to you?”

Lutin told me he would get it back, so I was curious. However, Mr. Blanche replied in the negative. “I’ve been puzzling over why someone would send such a warning when they’ve already stolen the painting. The alternative is that this was sent by someone else altogether,” he mused.

“I suspect it was the same person—or more precisely, the same organization.”

Such aggression felt consistent with the burglary from two days prior. Given the timing, it was only natural to suspect the Scalchi familia.

“The Violet Lady”... I can think of one reason to write that when they already have the painting.

Grace opened her mouth to speak, but frantic knocking interrupted her. The door opened before Mr. Blanche had a chance to respond. Actors crowded into the room, led by a male performer who was the leader of the troupe.

“Sir, what are we going to do about tonight’s performance?” he pressed. “Surely it’s impossible to go ahead with it given the state of things.”

Sighing, Mr. Blanche stood. “I’ll be with you shortly, so please wait outside. I’m speaking with the young lady of House Flaubert. She doesn’t appreciate your rudeness.”

Even this harsh rebuke was met with disgruntlement from the actors. They glared my way, and from their expressions, I could ascertain quite a bit about the situation without having to ask.

After managing to drive the actors out, Mr. Blanche lowered his head. “Nerves are severely frayed at the moment, what with one disturbance after another these past few days. I can only apologize for subjecting you to their disrespect.”

“It’s quite all right. You must be awfully busy at the moment, I’m sure. You have to decide what to do about tonight’s performance, don’t you?”

“Yes, indeed. I expect we’ll have no choice but close the show for the time being.”

“In that case, you needn’t concern yourself with me. Why don’t you go and deal with that? If it’s all right, though, I’d like to chat with Grace a little longer.”

When I looked to her, she nodded. It was for the best if she didn’t leave just yet. I’d already heard accusations that Lutin’s warning was part of a scheme concocted by Grace. Given that events had continued to unfold since then, I could only imagine that the murmurings about her had grown. For all I knew, the shouting I’d just heard in passing was more accusations being leveled against her. She *was* the cause of all this, but she was also the primary victim. I felt very sorry for her. In no way was she to blame.

Mr. Blanche caught my intention straight away. “Certainly. It will be difficult to talk in peace here with all the noise, however. Perhaps our apartment would be better. I’ll finish up here, so please take our guests home with you, Grace.”

“All right.”

After a flurried goodbye, Mr. Blanche left the room. The rest of us rose to our feet. Leaving through the front would mean getting mobbed by reporters, so we departed via a patrons-only exit. Both sides of the building had an area that allowed carriages to be driven inside, and while one was especially for the royal family, the equivalent space on the opposite side was for patrons of the theater. Joanna left ahead of us to summon the driver, then went around to the theater’s right flank to meet us there.

As we rode away from the theater, I turned to look back through the window. I saw no sign of reporters trying to follow us. Nor had I noticed any hint of the guard deployed by Prince Liberto. *What’s the point of surveillance if it doesn’t even prevent dressing rooms from being vandalized? Is the goal merely observing without doing anything? Or is it a matter of waiting for a more serious incident to occur before springing into action?*

Even if this was all part of some plan, it was a little much. I felt awful for the Blanches and everyone else at the theater, who knew nothing about what was really going on.

Sitting across from me, Grace looked calm. I wouldn’t have said she was cheerful, exactly, but she gazed outside with a placid expression. Satisfied that no one could possibly overhear us while we were traveling by carriage, I struck

up a conversation.

“This will all be resolved soon,” I assured her. “The other members of the troupe will understand that you’ve done nothing wrong, so you needn’t worry.”

Her turquoise eyes turned to me. Their color was quite similar to Prince Liberto’s—which only made sense, I realized. They were related by blood. How was I to tell her that, though?

“Thank you. This reminds me that I meant to thank you for the flowers the other day. They’re very pretty. I put them in the living room at home where Father and the housekeeper could enjoy them too. I really appreciate the gesture.”

“Oh, certainly,” I replied awkwardly. “You’re quite welcome.”

Giggling, she added, “Who would have expected the lady herself to deliver them by hand?”

I froze. “You realized it was me?”

“Seeing you like this, yes. I am an actress, so I spend my life altering my appearance to look like someone else. I can identify people at a glance, without being fooled by their clothing.”

My mouth fell open in shock. That reporter, Pieron, hadn’t noticed a thing. I’d disguised myself as a maid many a time in the past, and only Lord Simeon and Lutin had ever seen through me. Yet now there was a woman before me with senses keen enough to measure up to theirs.

“Well, I... I’m sorry for the fuss I caused. My presence must have confused matters all the more.”

“No, the real police came directly after the painting was stolen, and they knew they’d been had. They chased after the fake policeman, so there wasn’t much focus on you. Well, there was one person who had the wrong end of the stick, but it was fine otherwise.”

That misguided fellow I heard shouting after me, I imagine. I’d like to think that everyone else knew better.

Anyway, it was a relief to hear from Grace that I hadn’t made matters worse.

Joanna's piercing stare was getting to me, however, so I was eager to move the conversation along as quickly as possible.

"Do you know who the culprit is and what they're really after?" Grace asked.

"Yes. I was told by a certain someone, and he gave me permission to tell you. It's just difficult to know where to begin. Grace, how much do you know about your mother?"

She took on a puzzled look. She evidently hadn't been expecting such a question. "I barely remember her. She passed away when I was not yet four years old. My only clear memory is of the fire, when I was crying and calling out for her. My adoptive father found that so sad that he set his mind on finding other relatives of mine."

"That's why he hung up the painting, isn't it?"

"Yes. Father often goes to Lavia. He says it's to see theater performed in its heartland, but I believe it's at least partly to track down my mother's family. He's told me that he first met her while he was traveling. She'd run away from home and he helped her escape, employing her at the theater once they reached Lagrange. At that point, she was already pregnant with me. She never told him anything about my real father, apparently. All she said was that she'd fallen out of love with a good-for-nothing man."

"Did Mr. Blanche have feelings for your mother, by any chance?" I asked searchingly.

She let out a chuckle. "He says it was love at first sight. He's a very kind and trusting soul, isn't he? He helped a runaway, no questions asked. And following her passing, he adopted her child, holding true to his feelings even though he and my mother were never married. He's such a lovely person. Purely for my sake, he's trying his hardest to find any connection to my mother. That was why he bought the painting, but he doesn't know a thing about who it belonged to originally."

Listening to her story, I started to think that even the auction might have been a setup. Could all this really have unfolded so conveniently by pure coincidence? Even though I'd thought His Highness's explanation had revealed everything, it seemed there yet were secrets after all. Just how far-reaching was

Prince Liberto's plan?

"You inherited a necklace quite like this one from your mother, didn't you?" I drew back my shawl to reveal the amethyst necklace I was wearing.

"Oh, yes, it does look somewhat similar, doesn't it? Indeed, I have one like that."

"It's depicted in the painting as well. The 'Violet Lady' mentioned in the threatening letter must refer to the necklace. It's the painting's namesake, after all."

The woman before me—whose countenance was very similar to that in the painting but with eyes a different color—stared back at me, stunned. Next to me, Joanna hummed in agreement. Indeed, since the culprits had already taken the painting, there had to be another "Violet Lady" they were after. While pondering that, I had recalled Serena's lineage. She wasn't of a birth that would earn her the title of "lady."

The painting had probably come from Liberto I's estate. Given that, it likely bore a title along the lines of *My Beloved Serena* or *Memory of a Lover*. Putting it up for auction under the name of *The Violet Lady* had perhaps been an effort to make the necklace more prominent as a clue while also adding a touch of Prince Liberto's ironic sense of humor.

Our carriage turned a corner and we entered a high-class residential district. Fallen leaves carpeted the tree-lined street, and large, elegant housing complexes towered around us. Despite the neighborhood's close proximity to the theater district, there was no hustle and bustle to speak of. The area was entirely picturesque—a stark contrast to the surroundings of my secret apartment.

Grace gave directions to the driver. We were almost there, it seemed.

"That would make sense," she replied to me. "But the stones themselves can't be overly valuable. There must be some other motivation behind all this."

"You're catching on quickly. Indeed, it's likely related to an inheritance dispute. Upon Serena's passing, her only child was her sole heir. The 'Violet Lady' must be the proof of a blood tie to her. It's been passed down for

generations. Unless there was a great need of money, selling such a memento would be unthinkable.”

“An inheritance dispute?” she asked.

“The full details will be shared with you later by the appropriate party, I suspect. The key point is that both your mother’s family and your father’s are searching for her heir. Unfortunately, as I’m sure you’ve guessed, relations between the two groups are not especially amicable. In particular, the people from your mother’s side are somewhat problematic. The sort who might steal a painting, vandalize a theater, and send a threatening letter.”

Grace was struck silent.

“Don’t worry—there are also people who are well aware of the situation and working hard to put it right. Only, due to certain circumstances of their own, they’re forced to work from the shadows rather than reveal themselves. Parts of all this recent chaos are their doing as well, but...they should protect you, Grace.”

As instructed, I was doing my best to avoid painting the grand ducal family in a negative light, but candidly speaking, I didn’t much feel like defending Prince Liberto. It was hard to be sure whether he placed a higher priority on Grace’s safety or his own benefit.

Just as I finished speaking, the carriage came to a stop. We had reached our destination. Expecting to continue our conversation inside, Grace and I both alighted.

“Hmm?” I murmured.

Even though I had checked to make sure that we weren’t being followed, I now spied a suspicious figure standing on the opposite side of the street. Maybe “suspicious” was going too far...but maybe not. The woman wore the hood of her cloak so far over her face that even her eyes were largely hidden. She appeared to be shaking with fear as she turned her head this way and that to look around her. The fine quality of her clothes immediately told me that she was a young noble lady. Was she looking for someone she’d lost, or was she thoroughly lost herself?

Much as it seemed like an extraneous hassle given everything else going on, I couldn't simply ignore her now. Excusing myself to Grace, I crossed the road and called out to the woman as she tottered back and forth. "Excuse me, can I help you at all? Have you lost your way, perhaps?"

She whipped around with a start. At this close distance, I could now see her face beneath the hood. The instant we locked eyes, we both gasped.

"Henri—" I started to exclaim, but I caught myself and desperately forced my voice into a mere muffled yelp.

Meanwhile, she sounded close to tears as she cried, "Marielle!" Black ringlets spilled out from under her hood.

"Wh-What are you... Why are you here? Don't you have an escort? Any guards?!" Fighting to keep my voice furtive, I looked around for any familiar faces. Joanna and Grace were watching us from the other side of the street. Pedestrians and carriages passed as well, but I didn't see any of the ones I was expecting.

"I don't have anyone with me," she replied with a hint of embarrassed discomfort. "I'm on my own."

I turned back to face her...and pressed my hands to my temples. *Oh my. I think I finally understand how Lord Simeon always feels. Is this the sense of numb exhaustion I always trigger in him? Sorry, Lord Simeon!*

The cloaked woman returning my gaze with a surprised expression as I shrank back like a scolded child was none other than Princess Henriette herself—someone who absolutely should *not* be walking around the city on her own, even by accident. I had never heard of the princess exhibiting such wild behavior before. What on earth was she doing?

"Regardless," I began with awkward hesitancy, "come with me for now."

Somewhat forcibly pulling the princess along, I crossed the road again. We couldn't keep talking out on the street, unguarded and vulnerable.

"Apologies for rushing off like that," I told Grace. "I happened to bump into someone I know. She lost her way in the city. Would you mind terribly if she comes inside with us?"

“Not at all,” Grace replied. Turning, she said, “You must be quite exhausted. Please, come in and sit down. I’ll get you something warm to drink. Something to eat, too, if you’d like.”

The princess paused a moment, then said, “Thank you. You’re awfully kind.”

Leaving her in Grace’s hands for now, I took the opportunity to whisper in Joanna’s ear. “I’m sorry, but can you hurry to the palace with a message? This woman is Princess Henriette.”

“What?!” Joanna responded in a barely stifled exclamation.

“Shh! I don’t know what she’s doing here, but she’s all alone, so we *must* summon some guards at the very least. Can you please inform Lord Simeon?”

She nodded mechanically. “Y-Yes. Yes, I’ll do that.” Her face still a rictus, Joanna returned to the carriage. After watching it dart off, the rest of us entered the building before us.

Grace’s apartment was on the third floor. When we knocked on the front door, decorated with a wreath, a middle-aged woman who looked to be the housekeeper appeared. None the wiser about today’s incident at the theater, she was surprised to see Grace home at this hour. It was about time she should be getting ready for the evening’s performance.

For an apartment, the domicile was remarkably spacious. We were led to a bright sitting room with large, southern-facing windows that made it appear even more expansive than it was. The furniture emphasized tasteful simplicity over extravagance, giving the room a straightforward beauty in spite of, or perhaps because of, its lack of ornamentation.

Sitting down on a plain-looking but very comfortable chair, I finally breathed a sigh of relief. “Now, is there any chance you’d be able to tell me what you’re doing here?”

In a subdued tone, Princess Henriette replied, “My brother told me about Prince Liberto’s plan, and it was quite a shock. I had an intense desire to meet this woman called Grace.”

Hearing her own name gave Grace a start. Apparently not noticing this, the princess went on.

“I impulsively left the palace, accompanied of course, but along the way it struck me that I wasn’t sure what I would even do if I *did* meet Grace. I only wanted to see her—I had no particular intentions. I decided to try to get a peek at her without being noticed, but I realized that would require being alone. So I pretended I was wandering along at a distance, then I sneaked away.”

This left me reeling—legitimately, not figuratively. I had just made a much bigger ordeal of this than need be. *Oh no. I should have sent Joanna to find her guards nearby, not all the way to the palace. Why did I panic when I could have asked questions first? Still, what kind of guards would let the princess sneak away so easily? I must find out who was in charge! Lord Simeon will be having words with him!*

Princess Henriette needed to reflect on her actions as well, of course. Honestly, it felt quite uncomfortable to be the one thinking that. The shoe was on the other foot for once. Was this really how Lord Simeon suffered every time? I was truly, deeply sorry.

As that feeling crept over me, the princess similarly slumped her shoulders. “Sophie and the others must be so worried about me. Honestly, what was I thinking?”

“I suppose that’s just how shaken you were.” I pulled myself together and looked over at Grace, whose questioning gaze I responded to with a nod. “You managed to get lost in the most fortunate place imaginable. This is Grace Blanche.”

With a gasp of surprise, the princess turned to look at her. I wanted to continue our earlier conversation, but this took priority. As I was about to introduce Princess Henriette in turn, there came a knock at the front door. The housekeeper, who had only just brought tea in for us, wondered aloud who it might be as she went to answer it.

I listened intently. *It’s too soon for anyone to have come to get the princess. Is it a reporter, perhaps?*

“Who might you be?” the housekeeper asked.

“I’m from the police. I have some questions to ask about the incidents at the Théâtre d’Art.”

Following this exchange, I heard the door opening. The next moment, it sounded as though a stampede entered the apartment. There was a thunderous round of footsteps, and I thought I heard a quiet scream from the housekeeper. Grace and Princess Henriette both stood up, shocked. Before we were even on our feet, a group of men stormed into the living room.

“What’s going on?! Who are you people?!” Grace cried, raising her voice defiantly.

I stood in front of Princess Henriette to shield her. The men who’d barged in had shrewd eyes. Despite their ordinary clothing, they were clearly anything but respectable. Aside from the one holding the housekeeper’s arms behind her back, there were three others. They all appeared to be in their twenties or thirties. As I took them in, I saw a familiar face among them—the fake policeman from the other day. This was the very man who’d run off with the painting, and now he had burst in with a knife in his hand.

From behind them, a lone older man appeared. In a deep voice, he said, “Ah, yes, she does bear a strong resemblance to Serena in the face. She could be her older sister or an aunt, but I suppose that’s the march of time for you.”

This man and Mr. Blanche were roughly of an age. With his high-quality clothes and his walking stick, he appeared gentlemanly—but the glint in his eye was the sharpest of them all.

Grace drew back as if pushed. I retreated as well, keeping Princess Henriette behind me. *This is extremely bad. Why did they have to come now, when the princess happens to be here?*

It went without saying that the men who’d stormed Grace’s apartment were from the Scalchi familia.

Chapter Eleven

The older man approached, his eyes fixed on Grace alone. A short distance from her, he stopped and huffed. His lips twisting, he remarked, “Your eyes are a different color. They’re more like those of that grand duke she loved so much.”

“Grand duke?” Grace repeated dubiously.

Ignoring her, the man forcefully pounded his cane against the floor. “The Violet Lady. You must have the necklace you inherited from your mother. If you don’t want me to kill these women, hand it over.”

Grace gulped and turned to look at me. Given how much of the story I had told her already, she’d undoubtedly pieced together that this man was responsible for the threatening letter. He was part of the familia’s top brass who wasn’t happy with Scalchi’s will.

For him to come barging in after arranging a meeting time and place, I assumed he and his men hadn’t known where Grace lived. That prevented them from searching her apartment at their leisure, so instead, they’d planned to attack when Grace returned home to retrieve the necklace. She and I leaving the theater together had given them the perfect opportunity to tail us.

This possibility had occurred to me previously, but it seemed nigh unthinkable when there was supposed to be a guard. What on earth was said guard doing? He hadn’t prevented a single thing from occurring!

Oh, but of course. He wouldn’t. That’s not part of the prince’s plan.

“Where is the necklace?” the man demanded.

Grace opened her mouth but couldn’t manage a response. She faltered, her voice a mute mumble.

His eyes cold, the man gave a signal. The housekeeper screamed. Grace cried out for them to stop, nearly screaming herself, as the knife drew a red line across the housekeeper’s neck.

I was frozen in place, but my eyes flicked around desperately. I had to do something. Even if we complied with their demands, there was no telling what they might do to us afterward. *Besides, that necklace is probably...*

“We could simply kill you and search the apartment, but I’d like to save all that effort, so I’m asking nicely. Don’t even think of trying anything stupid. Just tell me where the necklace is.”

Her voice barely audible, Grace forced herself to speak. “I’ll... I’ll go and get it. I keep it in a safe, so I’ll have to open it for you. Please, just...just don’t...”

The man jerked his chin as a signal to his underlings. One of them followed Grace out of the room, keeping her in close proximity. For the first time, the boss now turned his eyes over the rest of us in the room. It was no more than a casual glance, though, with no hint that he might talk to us. To these men, we were likely mere bystanders. Which meant that we weren’t under especially heavy scrutiny. *In other words, now’s my chance!*

I ran toward the window before anyone could reach out to stop me. One of the underlings immediately gave chase and pulled me to the floor. After making sure the window was locked, he pulled the curtain closed, blocking off any view from outside.

“Trying to call for help from this height is a waste of time. In fact, we’d kill you before you even uttered a sound. Unless you’re interested in an early grave, keep quiet.”

Princess Henriette came over to me. Reassuring her that I was all right in a hush, I got myself up again. It didn’t look like these men would raise their hands against us any further, so we huddled together and drew back to the wall. They pushed the housekeeper over to us as well. Now that I could see the trembling woman’s wound up close, it was only a very light cut. The bleeding had largely stopped already.

All they’d meant to do for now was threaten us into submission, it seemed. They positioned one man in front of the window. He kept a fierce watch over us but didn’t tie us up. Nevertheless, I was sure that if we made any sudden movements, he wouldn’t hesitate to use force. His companions were poised as well, a dangerous gleam in their eyes.

“Marielle,” the princess began, but I shook my head to stop her. For the time being, all we could do was hold on. Any further attempts to stop them would be too dangerous.

Before long, Grace returned holding a timeworn jewelry box. I recognized its faded floral design. This was the same box that had been sitting in Grace’s dressing room when I’d delivered the flowers.

Stricken pale though she was, she pleaded desperately, “This contains the only memento I have of my mother. I’ll give it to you, so please, let the other women go. They don’t have anything to do with this.”

Without replying, the boss took the jewelry box from her. He opened it and looked inside for the necklace he sought, but then he tutted and tossed the entire box onto the floor. With a loud clatter, glittering gems in a variety of colors scattered across the floor. Topaz, garnet, emerald, pearl...and citrine.

Not one purple stone. As I’d overheard the lead actress say, the design of the necklace was the same, but the coloring was completely different. That was why the men hadn’t realized the truth.

Grace merely shrugged, but the boss exclaimed, “What is the meaning of this? I didn’t ask you to bring me all this...this rubbish!”

“But it’s all I have.”

“The *amethyst* necklace! The one from the painting! That’s the one I’m talking about!”

Caught in this situation where she knew so few of the details, Grace had to be terrified, but she held her ground and raised a trembling hand. As she moved to point at the necklace on the floor, I hurriedly interjected. I had to buy us some time.

“An amethyst necklace, you say? Is this the one?”

I pulled my shawl aside to reveal my neckline. The men’s gazes all turned toward me. The moment the boss laid eyes on the purple jewels, his expression shifted entirely. *Yes! I’ve hooked them. Now I need to reel them in.*

“Grace didn’t want it anymore, so I bought it from her. She didn’t say

anything about it being a memento from her mother.”

“Hand it over!” the boss demanded. The underlings set upon us.

I concealed the necklace behind my shawl again. Grace looked shocked, but I shook my head at her.

“Why do you want it so much anyway?” I asked the men. “It’s only amethyst, not an especially valuable stone. Why go to the trouble of sending threats and warnings over a piece of jewelry you could buy anywhere?”

“That has nothing to do with you. Hand it over right now.”

“Surely that’s no way to talk to someone whose property you’re stealing. You could at least give me a reason. Or are you afraid of mere women? Afraid of what we might do to you?”

“Marielle,” the princess murmured nervously, but I pushed her firmly behind me and ignored the hand she extended.

Everyone’s attention was fixed on me. The boss and his minions were watching my every move. The men all closed in, ready to grab me. I pushed Grace and Princess Henriette away from me, out of the way...

A shrill sound rang out. The windowpane shattered and something—someone—leaped in through the window. Two someones. The men turned to look, but before they even had a chance to brace themselves, the new arrivals rolled across the floor, then sprang up with full force and leaped at them.

The women in the room screamed. Neither they nor the men had any idea what was happening, I imagined. Two figures had entered. Quicker than I could even count, they punched and kicked the underlings, sending them flying and slumping to the ground. Furniture caught in the fray crashed to the floor along with vases and picture frames. The floor became a mess of glass and porcelain. Their sturdy boots paid no mind to this, striding across it with abandon.

One of the two new arrivals turned as he brushed glass shards from his clothes. He had a bleeding cut down one cheek, no doubt sustained when he’d jumped into the room. “Hello there, Bagni!” he said. “I’ve looked forward to meeting you. Nice of you to show yourself!”

Finally able to take stock of the situation, the boss ground his teeth in frustration. “*You.*”

I, in contrast, put a hand to my chest as relief swept over me. Prince Liberto’s guard, who’d seemingly done nothing all this time, had in fact been waiting for this moment. I’d known that help couldn’t be far, so I had decided a signal was in order to make it immediately apparent which apartment we were in. At a time of year like this when everyone yearned for any ray of sunlight they could get, it was unnatural for the curtains to be drawn on such a clear, bright day. Only our attackers would have a reason to close them.

Of course, I was only able to think about this all so confidently now that help was at hand. In truth, my knees felt like they were made of jelly. I’d feared what might happen if my signal were misinterpreted. I’d also had my doubts about how said help would get in. Looking now, I could see two ropes swaying in the breeze on the other side of the curtains. Had they used those to rappel down? Only a trained military officer and a master thief could manage such a feat—one that would have resulted in great injury with the slightest error.

Adjusting his crooked glasses, one of our rescuers addressed the housekeeper. “Could you unlock the front door, please?”

“Oh! Y-Yes...” Staggering, she left the sitting room.

I steadied my breathing and picked the citrine necklace up off the ground. “How sad for you,” I said to the criminals. “You finally had Grace hand over the item you were looking for and you didn’t even realize. This is the real Violet Lady.”

“What?!” the boss exclaimed.

I returned the necklace to Grace. Even though the color was wrong, it otherwise was a precise match to the piece in the painting. She clutched the keepsake to her chest, treasuring it.

“How can this be?!”

“Amethysts can change color. It’s widely known that one must be careful, as exposure to sunlight will make them fade. With heat, the change is even more dramatic—they turn the color of honey. That is, they turn into citrine. They say

that even naturally occurring citrines were originally amethysts transformed by geothermal heating.”

The boss was stunned into silence.

I continued, “When Serena tragically perished in that fire, this necklace was exposed to the flames. The setting is platinum and the smaller jewels used for decoration are diamonds, both of which are more heat resistant than amethysts. It’s fortunate that the main stones didn’t burn to nothing, but merely changed color.”

Grace had presumably been told before that the jewels were originally purple. When I looked at her, she nodded firmly.

“No... Damn it all...”

Lord Simeon approached the boss. “Tonio Bagni, we know that your men committed the theft and vandalism at the Théâtre d’Art. We’ve been watching you all along. I hope you’re prepared to accept that there is no talking your way out of this.”

The boss shrank back just as we had mere minutes ago. However, he wasn’t quaking in fear. He was glaring at Lord Simeon with murderous intent. Suddenly, he threw the cane he held in his hand. Naturally, Lord Simeon deflected it without a second thought. As he did, however, the boss kicked himself up off the floor and pulled a pistol from his jacket.

A gunshot sounded. A mirror on the wall shattered and more screams rang out.

Lord Simeon had succeeded in dodging the bullet. However, before he could move to subdue the boss, the latter’s bloodshot eyes turned toward me. “Damn you! This is all *your* fault!”

“Marielle!”

Lord Simeon’s cry coincided with a second gunshot. I held my arms up as if to somehow defend myself—and promptly fell to the floor, groaning in agony.

“You bastard!” Lord Simeon roared, his voice consumed by a rage seldom heard.

This could go very badly. Fighting back the pain, I lifted my head.

Lutin interjected, "Hold your horses, Vice Captain. We need him alive."

The saber driving toward the boss's throat was blocked by a chair leg with a fraction of a second to spare. The blade sliced halfway into the hard wood and Lutin, holding the article of furniture, let out a yelp. Even so, Lord Simeon did not hold back. He continued to push through the splintering wood.



“Stand aside.”

Intense bloodlust had consumed my husband. Faced with this, the crime boss who was no doubt used to violence stood frozen with fear behind Lutin.

“Calm down,” said Lutin in his ever-casual tone. “Take a proper look and you’ll see that Marielle is fine.”

This was no time for me to be lying around on the floor. I raised my voice, desperate to get through to Lord Simeon. “Yes, exactly!” I gasped, then groaned in pain. “I haven’t been shot! I just took a bad fall, that’s all.”

Ugh, though it does hurt. I’m quite embarrassed, frankly. I was prepared to duck at lightning speed, but my foot caught on the train of my dress and I toppled to the floor in an ungainly crash. That’s exactly why I hate these! I’d like the designer and everyone who thinks it’s the height of fashion to stare down the barrel of a gun for themselves! It’s highly inconvenient in an emergency!

Relief spread across Lord Simeon’s face when he turned his head to look at me. Even so, he continued trying to drive his saber forward.

Before I could speak again, another voice cut in. “Oh, stop it, Simeon. If you keep that up, you’ll bend your saber.”

I looked over. His Highness had entered, accompanied by royal guards.

“Severin,” uttered Princess Henriette, her voice a mix of relief and tears. Before doing anything else, the prince went over to his sister to make sure she was all right.

The royal guards arrested the men splayed out on the floor and their boss. Lord Simeon finally released his grip on the saber. With a snort of a laugh, Lutin tossed the chair aside. *Honestly, you mustn’t treat his saber so roughly! Imagine if you really did bend it.*

“When Marielle is involved, all your judgment goes right out of the window, doesn’t it?” Lutin said. “If Bagni died here and now, that would be a serious problem. What do you think all this elaborate scheming was for?”

“He earned a death sentence the moment he pointed a gun at Marielle. Are you suggesting you’d allow such an affront?”

“You stubborn, pampered little dunce. Decapitating him in an instant would be too merciful. I’d make sure he really suffers. Torment him until he begs for death. I’m not kind enough to let him die without making him feel it.”

“You’re each as bad as the other!” I exclaimed, standing with Grace’s help.

Ignoring Lutin for now, Lord Simeon ran over to me and embraced me tightly before I even had time to reassure him that I was fine. His trembling, so thunderously intense that it hurt as it ran through me, made his own terror apparent.

“I felt as though my heart had stopped,” he confessed.

I raised my arms and wrapped them around him. “I’m sorry.” There were all sorts of other things I wanted to say, but couldn’t in the moment. My husband had been so worried for my sake that he’d been unable to restrain himself even in front of his subordinates and his master. For now, I just silently stroked his back.

A new voice remarked, “My, you two are every bit as passionate as I’ve heard. Bambino, I hope you won’t start feeling down because they’re flaunting it in your face.”

I recognized that teasing tone. Though it was a struggle in Lord Simeon’s tight embrace, I raised my head to behold the newest arrival to the scene.

“They’re always acting like this in front of me,” Lutin replied, shrugging his shoulders indifferently. “And I wish you wouldn’t call me that in public.”

Surprise coloring her voice, the princess uttered, “Prince Liberto.”

He looked at her with his pale turquoise eyes, a kind smile on his face. “I’m glad to see that you’re safe. When I heard that you had disappeared, I was quite worried.”

Before, the prince’s beautiful smile had been enough to make the princess blush. Yet now, her face clouded over. She looked as though she was about to say something, but in the end, she silently turned away.

This prompted Prince Liberto to cock his head in confusion for a moment, but he paid it no further mind for now and looked at Grace instead. More precisely,

he looked at the necklace in her hands.

“Of course,” he murmured. “The fire.”

This closed the curtain on the thievery and threats that had all begun with Lutin’s warning message. Ultimately, everything had run exactly as Prince Liberto had planned. Even this attack had been per his predictions. He’d probably calculated my involvement as well.

Bagni and his minions were pushed into a waiting carriage and taken to a military facility. At some point they would be handed over to Lavia, but first they would be questioned here.

Princess Henriette went back to the palace with Sophie and her other ladies-in-waiting, who had rushed to the scene upon receiving word. She exchanged a few further words with Grace, but she never met Prince Liberto’s eyes.

Chapter Twelve

And so the matter was cleared up without the public even realizing it. The city was the same as ever when I next went to meet my editor at the secret apartment. There was but a lone scorch mark on the floor, the sign a greater conflagration had thankfully never occurred. To note, there was dilapidation elsewhere in the building apart from just the kitchen wall. The balconies and staircase were also looking rather unsafe in parts.

Perhaps we really do need to demolish the building and replace it with a new one. As I was pondering what arrangements we'd make for the residents while covering up the burn mark with a rug I'd brought, Mr. Satie called me over.

"I don't think it's bad at all. I'd consider these points," he said. He'd been looking over the outline I'd drafted for my new work, which he now returned to me with his own comments added to indicate any questions and concerns.

"Do you think it will appeal to men?" I asked him.

"People have all sorts of different tastes, don't they? If you make the romance element just one factor of the story rather than its central core, I think you'll see less offhand dismissal. On the other hand, there will be readers who feel as though it's not prevalent enough."

"Well, readers with a strong interest in romance can always seek out my regular fare."

"That's true."

Mr. Satie made a start on the tart we had been given by the lady downstairs. I offered to pour the tea, but received a firm rebuff.

"Whenever you pour it, there are leaves mixed in. I'll do it myself."

"I've improved lately, I'll have you know."

He poured my tea as well, and we enjoyed the tart together. It was a delightful pear and grape confection that we polished off in no time.

“The everyday life of a poor nobleman’s daughter,” he remarked. “While dealing with the small-scale incidents that happen around her, she suddenly finds herself caught up in a much larger case. It reminds me of a certain someone I know.”

“Oh my! I cannot possibly imagine what you mean.”

“I’d say it’s a smart move to focus on a theme that comes to you so effortlessly. If you obsess over writing something men will read and overextend yourself into an unfamiliar genre, you’re sure to struggle. Even if the story doesn’t deal with anything too grandiose, as long as it includes charming interactions between characters that feel like unique individuals, it will provide more than enough entertainment—especially when readers can enjoy reading a tiny bit more of it every day.”

I wanted to become an author who could write about complex subject matter, but for now, I didn’t have the requisite knowledge. I would have to learn more, observe more people, and amass huge amounts of reference material inside my mind. Rather than panicking and writing about something I had only surface-level knowledge of, I had decided to stick with what I knew.

Until now, I had always used other people as a basis for my characters or created them out of whole cloth. Yet, as Mr. Satie had hinted, I myself was the model this time. I wasn’t planning to write an autobiography, of course. Rather, I meant to write about the world I knew—the world of a plain young lady who existed in high society but was never its star. Since I was so intuitively familiar with it that I didn’t even need to do any research, I was sure writing about it would come easily to me. However, since that alone wasn’t enough to arouse my excitement, I had to add the intrigue of several smaller events unexpectedly unfolding into a larger plot. The protagonist would also fall for a man of unknown background and experience some heartache.

The love between Grace’s parents, Liberto I and Serena, had sadly been doomed from the start. Adultery leading to divorce is common enough, but it could never have been so simple for a member of the grand ducal family. In all likelihood, Liberto I never had any intention of marrying Serena. When he additionally found out that she was the daughter of Scalchi, continuing their relationship became unthinkable. I could guess the mood of their parting based

on what Serena told Mr. Blanche, *i.e.* her evaluation of her lover as a “good-for-nothing man.”

That said, I was certain that Serena’s flight wasn’t only because of her lover’s betrayal; it was also an act of rebellion against her father. If only she hadn’t been born as Scalchi’s daughter, she’d never have suffered so—at least, it would be understandable for her to feel that way. Not wishing the same fate for her own child, she’d abandoned her affluent life and gone into hiding.

At least in a story, I want to give the main character a happy ending to her romance. Not knowing who her lover really is will cause her some anxiety, even disappointment, and I’d like the reader to fret alongside her, but after many trials and tribulations, I want the last words of the grand finale to leave the reader happy and satisfied.

Mr. Satie and I parted ways, and I went straight to the *Chersie* newspaper office to meet with the editor-in-chief, Mr. Berger. He approved my outline and told me he was looking forward to my story. “I like that it’s about the world as seen by a noblewoman. We have many readers among the nobility, but more than half are commoners who wish they could be part of that world. They’re curious about the home lives of nobles, their habits, how their children are educated, and the nature of their marriages. Depicting those sorts of minutiae is sure to attract a lot of interest.”

“In that case, wouldn’t it be better to write about someone from a more prestigious house, not some minor noble family with little means?”

“I’d like it if you featured characters like that as well, but leave the main character as she is. Wouldn’t it be rather unlikely for a young lady from a high-ranking family to be involved in these sorts of incidents?”

“Oh, yes. I suppose so...”

“Well, it *would* be interesting to read a story about such a singular noblewoman, but this time around, let’s go with what you’ve proposed. It’s sure to be the talk of the town. Good luck! I have high hopes!”

Chersie had contacted me through Satie Publishing, so I’d yet to reveal my real name or background to Mr. Berger. Nevertheless, he’d seemingly discerned that I hailed from a noble house. Grateful to him for not pressing the matter, I

debated whether I might confide in him closer to the end of the serialization period as I left the newspaper's fine office building.

Arriving home late seemed to cause no end of worry, so today I meant to return when the sun was still high in the sky. My meetings had wrapped up more quickly than anticipated, however, leaving me with time to spare. I thus decided to take a small detour. First I went to the stationery store that had the largest selection in the city to ask about a particular item. I drew the design from memory and inquired with a sales clerk.

"We have the Acker catalog here, but I'm afraid that design isn't sold anymore." He brought out an article not included in the product samples on display. "It was a commemorative design produced when the Lavian grand duke ascended the throne."

The page he opened to indeed bore the same printed pattern as the letter from the painting. After confirming when it *had* been on sale, I thanked the clerk and left. An omnibus was just passing. This time I managed to jump on board without even having to rush. *Another skill I've acquired!*

Following a bumpy ride, I got off in the theater district. Today there was no crowd outside the Théâtre d'Art. The front entrance was clear again. The halted production had since reopened, and the final performance was fast approaching.

Rather than entering the theater, I purchased a paper from a newsstand—the peerless gossip rag *La Môme*. True to form, it contained an article reflecting on the Théâtre d'Art and fabricating ludicrous nonsense about the remaining mysteries.

"I'm unhappy about such a tactless crime being committed in my name, so I'm returning the painting to its rightful owner."

Accompanied by this self-important message bearing Lutin's signature, the stolen painting had indeed been safely restored to the custody of Mr. Blanche. The first paper to report on it, as an exclusive scoop, was none other than *La Môme*. This was enough to convince everyone that the initial warning and the events thereafter were perpetrated by a fake. Criminals fraudulently borrowing the famous thief's name came along every so often, so the public concluded

that this was another such case. By now, the word on every tongue was that it had seemed strange all along for Lutin to give a warning in advance, and that everyone had doubted it was truly him from the start—all of this entirely within reason. The real Lutin’s thoughtful touch at the end prompted jubilant applause as well.

Everything could have been left to resolve itself, I supposed, but this meant the Théâtre d’Art was no longer a source of gawking and hubbub. The curious onlookers had lost interest and scattered. Even the number of reporters had dwindled almost to nothing. As I passed one, I offered a curtsy and said, “Be sure not to work too hard.”

“Don’t worry, I— Hmm?”

He alone was still there, still trying. Even though I’d sent him information anonymously, he continued to skulk around the theater in hopes of uncovering a juicy scoop. *Does this mean he’s lost all interest in exposing female authors’ identities?*

As I walked on, a voice called out from alongside me, “Would you care for a crepe, young lady?”

When I turned my head, puzzled that there was suddenly a crepe stand where there never had been one before, my eyes quickly narrowed. The man approaching with a crepe in one hand was the mischievous thief himself. *The real scoop is right here! If only that reporter knew!*

“No, thank you. Could I ask you not to get too close? If I associate with you, my husband is liable to become very jealous.”

“Don’t you get fed up with catering to that small-minded man’s feelings?”

“Not in the slightest. It reassures me of his love, and that makes me happy. That’s why I’m making it perfectly clear that I live only for him.”

“How cold when you have another man who loves you right here.”

Lutin’s attitude had not changed one bit. To look at his face, he’d completely forgotten about threatening me the other night. I didn’t know what his intentions were, but he was once again making an attempt to woo me in a way that sounded like no more than a joke, which left me at something of a loss.

Honestly, though, I can't listen to any more of his superficial nonsense.

"I have no choice *but* to be cold. If I treat you amiably even though I have no romantic interest in you, you call me cruel."

"Are you still upset?"

"I'm being most truthful when I tell you that I don't know what I can do. I don't hate you. I even think of you as a friend, but perhaps that attitude only hurts you. That's why I have to remind you that I have no intention of betraying Lord Simeon. If I have to hurt one of you or the other, I'm afraid I'm going to side with Lord Simeon."

The sardonic expression left Lutin's face. His smile looked strained now, as if he was troubled underneath. Seeing him this close up, I could make out a faint hint of a scar on his cheek.

"Why have I fallen for such a pure young lady?" he said. "It's so unlike me that I can't help but laugh."

I looked back at him, my eyes narrowing slightly.

"You can't even imagine having the best of both worlds, can you? You're determined to be good and virtuous at all costs. Still, you don't have to worry. I'm not as fragile as you think. I'd rather you laugh than give me the cold shoulder. I'm not going to give up, you know. All right—'friends,' is it? At least I've made it that close to you. That means there's a chance of getting even closer."

"No! There isn't!"

Shaking with laughter, he pushed the crepe toward me, and I refused it again. *It looks so delicious though. It's not as though the crepe has done anything wrong... No! I mustn't give any ground! Not here, not now!*

In the end, I still didn't understand what was going on inside his head. I'd thought he might have been legitimately hurt the other day, but he showed no sign of that now. Instead, he was laughing just as he always did. *Should I take that as reassurance?*

"Aren't you going in?" He pointed toward the Théâtre d'Art, which I had been

walking away from.

I shook my head. "I only came to see if the situation had calmed down. They'll all be very busy at this time of the day, I'm sure. Actually, you might be able to help me. Has the prince spoken to Grace at all?"

"Well, yes."

"And what happened?"

Now that he was back to his usual self, Lutin answered rather evasively. "They discussed this and that. There were explanations and apologies and conversations about what will happen next. Not that much will change, ultimately. Grace will continue to work as an actress. That's what she wants. Her pedigree also won't be announced to the public, since the media would leap on it like vultures. This goes without saying, but you'd better keep quiet about it yourself."

"Of course," I replied after the briefest of pauses. This was as I had expected. It was the very basis of Prince Liberto's plans, after all.

Lutin looked very mildly surprised that I didn't press further, but instead of saying anything, he retrieved an envelope with his free hand. I readily accepted it. The sealing wax was imprinted with the crest of the Lavian grand ducal family.

"It's an invitation to tea. He'd like to apologize for all this recent business."

"Prince Liberto, you mean?"

The prince could have given it to Lord Simeon, yet he'd purposely tasked Lutin with delivering it. That showed keen insight on his part, I supposed.

"Oh," I said in sudden realization. "There's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"Well, that's my cue to leave!"

Apparently sensing my intentions, Lutin turned to go, but I grabbed hold of his coat. "Not so fast!" When he stopped, I asked, "Did I hear the prince call you 'Bambino'?"

"Please don't ask me about that. I despise it."

“Is it some kind of affectionate nickname? Does that mean you’re closer than merely a master and subordinate? Have you known each other since you were children?”

“I would *really* rather not talk about it. He does it on purpose. It amuses him to see how much it annoys me.”

When I looked up at him, he averted his gaze in a rare moment of bashfulness. I wasn’t trying to tease him about it, but it *was* rather amusing.

“Since it means ‘child,’ does that mean you’re younger than him? Prince Liberto is twenty-six, so you must be exactly the age you’ve looked all along.”

“So what if I am? Are you trying to highlight that I’m much younger than the Vice Captain? That doesn’t matter. I’ve still had far more life experience than that blockhead who was raised with a silver spoon in his mouth.”

“That wasn’t the point I was making.”

I’d suspected that Lutin must be in his early twenties, and now I had proof to put a nice little bow on the matter. Seeing my cheerful expression, however, Lutin looked less than thrilled himself. *If I push my luck and ask for his real name now, he definitely won’t tell me.*

I opted to inquire about a different matter. “If you’re closer to Prince Liberto than your working relationship would suggest, maybe you could share something else with me. How does he see Princess Henriette?”

Lutin scratched his head, his expression blank. “As his fiancée. How else should he see her?”

“Don’t avoid the question. I realize theirs is a political union, so I’m not expecting any romantic attraction. I’m asking what he thinks of her as a person and how he intends to treat her as a partner. Can you tell me anything about that?”

The charming prince was all smiles, yet underneath that guise, he was calculating and blackhearted. I’d fangirled over this at first, but recent events had complicated my feelings about the man immensely.

“That’s between the two of them, surely. Why do you need to be concerned

about it?”

“I happen to have a great fondness for Princess Henriette, I’m afraid. Granted, it’s her life and she must face it herself, but that doesn’t mean it has absolutely no effect on those around her. Not as I see it.”

“The list of people you have ‘a great fondness for’ seems to be a long one. I can’t imagine what the Vice Captain has had to endure.”

With sudden agility, Lutin pulled away from me. Though I thought I’d been holding the hem of his coat the entire time, I suddenly found a crepe in my hand instead. “Wait, when did you... Stop!”

This time, with a chuckle, he escaped my outstretched arm. From beyond a number of pedestrians who turned to look in curiosity, he waved and said, “If you’d like to know that, you can ask him yourself. You might actually be able to draw out the real him. If you’re sure you won’t regret shattering the illusion of perfection, I’d give it a try.”

Rather than answering my question, Lutin left me with words that could be taken as encouragement—or teasing for all I knew. I sullenly watched him disappear into the distance and bit into the crepe. The contrasting flavors of cream cheese and jam tantalized my taste buds.

When Lord Simeon arrived home that evening, I showed him the invitation while telling him about my encounter with Lutin. Though my husband looked predictably unamused, he was not surprised.

“I heard about this,” he said. “I was invited to join as well. If you’d rather not go, we can always say that your illness has returned.”

“That excuse would never hold up at this late stage.”

I took his coat as he removed it. A spare saber was hanging from his sword belt, his usual trusty blade having been sent off for sharpening after his rather reckless use of it.

“You look reluctant, though.” He stroked my cheek with one of his large hands. The warmth of his just-ungloved hand felt soft against my skin. I placed my own hand on top of his.

“There are all sorts of things I’d like to interrogate the prince about. My heart is full of burning questions, but I’ll be forced to smile politely. It won’t be much fun. Still, it will be a chance to see Princess Henriette, so I’d like to go.”

“Interrogate him?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t actually. I’ll show the prince proper respect.”

Despite what Lutin had suggested, someone of my station could never behave so insolently. Prince Liberto was here on a state visit. I had to be careful not to embarrass our own crown prince.

I passed Lord Simeon’s coat to a maid and asked her to take care of it. While he changed in the bedroom, I started making some tea. He returned very quickly indeed, just as I was pouring the tea, carefully trying to avoid any leaves making it into the cup.

After placing the cups, I sat not beside Lord Simeon, but opposite him. He looked a tiny bit miffed, though I ignored his gaze imploring me to come closer. “Since I can’t interrogate the visiting prince, I’ll petition my husband instead. There are still some major details you’re keeping from me, aren’t there?”

He said nothing, so I went on.

“What His Highness told me was only the presentable version of the story, no? Taking down the crime syndicate was important, I’m sure, but in truth, the bigger problem from Prince Liberto’s point of view was that Grace is Liberto I’s illegitimate descendant. Isn’t that right?”

Without answering, Lord Simeon lifted his cup to his mouth. All emotion had disappeared from his handsome face, leaving his countenance almost cold. Here he was—the brutal, blackhearted military officer. As beautiful as a doll, but with a menacing air. *My Demon Vice Captain. How incredible he is.*

“The incident started with Liberto I and Scalchi both passing away in quick succession,” I continued. “His Highness said that the grand ducal family learned of the illegitimate daughter and investigated, but how did they come to learn of her in the first place? This is where my questions begin.”

Still not a word from Lord Simeon.

“Scalchi wasn’t the only one who left a will, of course. It goes without saying that Liberto I left one too. He was an elderly man, after all, not a young person who passed suddenly. His will must have included some reference to his illegitimate daughter. After Serena disappeared, he must have investigated and learned about Grace.”

If the Lavians hadn’t learned of Grace’s existence until the will was read, they never would have found her so quickly. Serena had been very cautious in hiding herself, fearing being taken back to her homeland against her will, and it had now been thirty years since her death. Tracking down her daughter couldn’t have been an easy task.

When I visited Grace in her dressing room, she had mentioned the recent passing of an elderly patron. He had treated her very well, she said, even though he lived abroad and they only met rarely. In other words, the grand ducal family had known where Grace was all along. The whole thing was planned—even the painting making its way into Mr. Blanche’s possession.

“Liberto I may not have been faithful, but he was by no means cold and unfeeling. Perhaps as a form of atonement, he left money to Grace. However, I doubt that alone would be enough to bother Prince Liberto so much. My suspicion is that Liberto I wrote in his will that Grace should be officially acknowledged as a member of the grand ducal family.”

Lord Simeon did not show even the faintest hint of a reaction. He continued sipping his tea in silence. Of course, I knew well and good that this was an answer in itself.

“This caused quite some consternation for Prince Liberto and the rest of the family. Such an affair would naturally be a point of contention, but it was an especially thorny issue in Grace’s case. The grand ducal family was trying to cut all ties to the Scalchi familia and eradicate it altogether, but now they’d be welcoming, of all people, Scalchi’s granddaughter into their ranks. They had to cover up all of it, including Liberto I’s past impropriety.”

More silence.

“Then, at almost the same time, Scalchi himself died, prompting Bagni’s faction to seek out Grace. Prince Liberto decided he could turn the situation to

his advantage and kill two birds with one stone.”

After setting his teacup down, Lord Simeon picked up Chouchou, who had been snuggling up against him, and put her in his lap. However, the cat was apparently not in the mood for this and ran away from him.

“Even that letter was contrived after the fact, wasn’t it?” I went on. “The stationery it was written on wasn’t sold until twenty years ago—long after Serena’s passing. By that time, Liberto I’s rheumatism had worsened to the point that such neat handwriting would have been impossible for him. It would be odd for the younger generations to go out of their way to dig up such an old letter, and as I’ve noted, the handwriting had to be someone else’s. Trying to use that letter as fodder for blackmail would conversely prompt accusations of fraud, so it was a carefully crafted double or triple bluff.”

Though I again looked for some response from my husband, I was left to continue my one-sided conversation.

“Prince Liberto and his family planted information that they knew Bagni would jump on. And everything was going according to plan until Pieron the reporter barged in. It was a good thing that I picked up the letter and not him, wasn’t it?”

Having been rejected by the cat, my husband opened his arms as if to invite me closer. Feigning ignorance, I merely stroked Chouchou, who had climbed up into *my* lap. Giving in to his advances would mean letting him wriggle his way out of this. He would have to wait until we were done talking.

Disregarding his now reproachful gaze, I nuzzled my cheek against the cat. “Though this was an opportunity to apprehend one of the familia’s key figures, that was only one side of the story. The other goal was to make Grace keenly aware of how dangerous her situation was and instill fear in her. After all, Lutin could have stopped Bagni when he caught up to us, but he didn’t. Letting them attack her was entirely intentional. And you and Prince Severin were complicit in that, weren’t you?”

When I cast a brief glance at him, he averted his gaze.

“After she was threatened quite severely, Prince Liberto would sweep in to offer sanctuary from the Scalchi familia and a certain amount of money. In

exchange, he would ask her not to reveal her background publicly under any circumstances. That's the real crux of all this, isn't it?"

Even after I finished, Lord Simeon did not reply. He remained cold and expressionless, but I sensed an uneasiness about him too. I took a breath and lowered Chouchou onto a cushion.

"I may be talking to myself, but I've long promised my husband that I would forgive him for lying and keeping secrets, so I have no intention of blaming him."

Chouchou shifted her position, rolling around on the cushion until she got comfortable and then huddling up. After watching her start to doze off, I moved over to Lord Simeon. As soon as I sat in his lap, he embraced me.

"Since Princess Henriette is marrying into Lavia's grand ducal family," I said, "the Lagrangian royal family cannot say that this matter does not concern them. That's why they cooperated—and why I was allowed to go to the theater with so little resistance. I can't imagine you would be so happy for me to be used like that, so it must have been His Highness's decision."

At last, Lord Simeon spoke. "You've learned a lot from all your experience. He said that if we tried to keep you away, you'd mysteriously end up right in the center of the action regardless, so it would be better to keep tabs on you from the outset."

"Goodness."

"He also said that if you were involved, you would no doubt make yourself useful."

If Lord Simeon apologized, it would imply that His Highness was at fault somehow, so he couldn't simply say that he was sorry. Deep furrows formed on his brow. With a smile, I reached up and gently massaged him in an attempt to relieve the tension.

"I'm glad I was able to meet His Highness's expectations—although if I'd known that you would be there to protect me, I'd have been far calmer about the situation. It was rather dashing when you came bursting into the room."

His hand slipped into my hair, tickling my ear and the nape of my neck. Then

his lips gently drew closer to mine. He kissed me over and over, each one light as a feather. Our glasses didn't even collide.

Though I was spellbound, he suddenly asked a question that cooled all the passion. "What did you talk to Lutin about?"

So that was bothering him after all. I shrugged. "Nothing much. It was our usual back-and-forth. I told him I wouldn't be swayed by him and he didn't acknowledge it at all." I paused a moment. "I'm actually starting to think he isn't genuinely trying to woo me. It feels as though exchanging snide remarks is the part he actually enjoys."

"He's trying to lower your guard by making you think so," Lord Simeon said sullenly, having returned to his usual demeanor. "You mustn't let him get away with it."

Suppressing a laugh, I acquiesced to his kiss again.

There was no shortage of wonderful gentlemen in the world and my life suffered no lack of thrilling surprises, yet these moments filled me with more happiness than anything. I would never commit adultery, and I firmly believed that Lord Simeon wasn't the type either. Our trust in one another made the time we spent together, living together, bright and bountiful.

As for Lutin, he'd seemed to enjoy himself even though I had rebuffed him, so I decided not to worry. He was trying to interfere in our relationship, so he must have accounted for the rejection already. I didn't want to hurt him unnecessarily, but upon reflection, there was no reason for me to feel guilty.

My bigger worry was Princess Henriette. She had been positively enamored with Prince Liberto, but the last I saw her, she'd studiously avoided meeting his gaze. I hadn't been able to talk to her since then, so I was quite concerned. What had shaken her so that she'd instantly come running like that?

I do hope she's all right. I am starting to fear the worst.

Chapter Thirteen

My fears turned out to be justified. When I arrived at the palace for the tea party, one of Princess Henriette's ladies-in-waiting came rushing over.

"Mrs. Flaubert, could I please ask your assistance?"

Sophie, the most senior of the princess's ladies-in-waiting, was eager for me to come with her. Anxiety clouded her face. Lord Simeon and I exchanged a glance, then followed her to Princess Henriette's chambers. Ladies-in-waiting and housemaids crowded the corridor, and for some reason Prince Severin was pounding against her door.

"Henri, stop this juvenile behavior and open the door at once!"

"No!" she shouted from inside, sounding tearful. "Leave me alone!"

Julianne was standing a short distance away. I went over to her and asked, "What's going on?"

"Oh, Marielle, you're here." Julianne was to attend today's tea party as well, so she was dressed very finely indeed. After curtsying to Lord Simeon, she whispered into my ear, "The princess has locked herself in her room."

"I gathered that much. My question is why."

Julianne turned to look at Sophie. When it came to Princess Henriette, Sophie no doubt knew more about her than even her family did. Noticing our attention, she came over to explain, "The princess has been out of sorts since what happened the other day, but today, with the tea party coming up, her spirits rapidly sank even further. She started saying that she couldn't possibly see Prince Liberto."

Oh, I see. I silently nodded. *All this really has had quite an impact on her.*

"Did she have some sort of argument with him?" Julianne asked.

I shook my head and replied, "No, not exactly."

I went over to Prince Severin and prodded him in the back. When he turned

his head, I stretched up on tiptoes and whispered, “Your Highness, why did you tell Princess Henriette about you-know-what?”

He bent down slightly and replied in an equally hushed tone, “She’s marrying into the grand ducal family. I thought it only right that she should know. If we hid it from her, word would eventually reach her ears anyway, and there’s no telling what twisted form it would have been contorted into by that point. I wanted her to be aware of the truth in advance so that she wouldn’t unwittingly be misled, but...this is the result.”

With that, he turned back to the door looking quite vexed. Since it was locked from the inside, not even the princess’s ladies-in-waiting could enter.

“First she runs off without warning, and now this,” he said. “Why is she acting this way?”

“She must have grown disillusioned with Prince Liberto.”

“Is that reason enough to sequester herself? She should know the significance of her engagement better than anyone. As a royal princess, it’s not becoming for her to throw such a tantrum because not everything is to her liking.”

“I’m not sure that’s entirely fair,” I protested, but in truth, I shared his doubts. She was a strong individual, not a selfish, coddled princess by any means. Ordinarily, she would never do anything to make her friends and family worry. Her actions the other day were truly out of character—it was honestly quite strange for anything to agitate her so profoundly. Even the surprise discovery of her prince’s blackhearted nature didn’t *explicitly* affect her, as someone else had been the victim.

I stood in front of the door and called out, “Princess Henriette, it’s me.”

A pause. “Marielle?”

“Yes. Are you all right? What on earth is the matter?”

Only silence came from within. With a gesture, I bid His Highness remain quiet for now. The surrounding ladies-in-waiting and housemaids, meanwhile, simply watched in a fluster, likely ignorant as to the particulars of what had transpired.

“You don’t have to open the door,” I assured the princess. “I won’t try to

force you to come out, so could you please at least answer me? If you don't want to see Prince Liberto, does this mean that you wish to call off the engagement?"

"No," she replied. Her voice was clearer now, as she had come right up to the door.

"You don't hate him, then?"

It took a moment before she said anything else. Then, "No, it's not that. Only..." Another pause. "I simply don't know."

"You don't know your own feelings?"

"No. Well, yes, actually. That as well."

Rather than hurrying her along, I waited patiently for her to calm herself and gather her thoughts. Though His Highness was growing visibly antsy as the arranged time for the tea party approached, I told him with a sharp look that he should stand down. Julianne tugged on his arm as well, and he reluctantly drew back.

"Well," the princess began slowly, "you see..."

"Yes?"

"The events of the other day were a great shock, but I don't blame him as such. I understand the circumstances. That's not the issue."

I listened, albeit in surprise. What Princess Henriette was saying sounded like her, but based on her expression the last time I saw her, they were hard to believe. Perhaps she'd since come to terms with the situation now that she'd had time to reflect on it.

"It's just that I don't know what to do," she continued.

"Do you need to do anything?" I asked.

"I don't mean it in that sense."

It was still very hard to grasp what she was hinting at, but I kept listening and did not press her. *I see you, Your Highness and Vice Captain! Don't you move!* Both of them looked ready to charge it in at any moment, but I warded them off

with a glare.

“It makes sense to me in theory, but that doesn’t mean my heart can accept it in practice. Not so easily. When I think of Prince Liberto’s position, I realize this sort of thing is inevitable. The same is true of Father and Severin. Not everything they’re tasked with is all sweetness and light, and I accept that. Only...it hasn’t changed.”

“Hmm? What hasn’t?”

“When this all started—when that warning message set off all the commotion—Prince Liberto simply smiled as though it had nothing to do with him whatsoever. That’s why I didn’t realize that anything was going on beneath the surface. We even talked about it after that, and he maintained the same flawless facade, giving me no indication of any kind.”

I paused, then nodded. “I see.” Though I didn’t say so, I could well believe that. I could picture his very expression. His beautiful face had no doubt held an angelic smile entirely at odds with any hint of blackhearted scheming.

“After what Severin told me, I knew it was all a lie. I could no longer believe his smile...and it hasn’t changed. He still smiles like he did when he lied to me.”

Unsure of what to say, I simply let her continue.

“Do you remember when you and I talked of this before? About not knowing his true nature? I accepted it, as we’d only just met. It’s only natural that our knowledge of each other would be superficial. I started to believe that if we spent more time together, he’d start to reveal himself, just like you said. Alas, reality is hardly so kind. To him, I might be another pawn for him to manipulate at will.”

Ah, so that’s what she’s been getting at. I finally understood. No wonder she was so beside herself. The princess had already been fretting over her inability to tell what her betrothed was really thinking. Of course she couldn’t see Grace’s situation as entirely divorced from her own.

I couldn’t even tell her she was wrong. In truth, Prince Liberto was marrying her for the benefit of Lavia and the grand ducal family, and she very likely held no other significance to him. He probably hadn’t been yearning to see her with

the same innocent longing that she harbored for him before they met. Equally, simply agreeing with her would be far too blunt. Difficult though it was, I attempted a rebuttal.

“I’ll grant that he seems to be a man with a strong separation between his inward and outward personas, but that doesn’t mean everything he shows on the outside is a lie. I’m sure he only does it when necessity demands.”

“But that could very well include me. In fact, I’m sure of it. However you look at it, his wife by an arranged marriage has to fall into the category!”

That much...is indeed true. I can hardly deny it.

“I know I have to accept that,” she said. “As a princess, I’m marrying him to build a bridge between our two nations. I’ve always accepted that would be my part to play. I’ve never whined even once. And it’s not as though this possibility has never occurred to me. I’ve been telling myself that my expectations have simply come to fruition...but I can’t help this sadness. My heart aches. As pathetic as I feel, and as keenly as I’m aware that a princess mustn’t carry on this way, I simply cannot calm my heart no matter how I try. If I continue to feel this way forever, I don’t know how I can ever face Prince Liberto again. I have no idea what to say to him. I’m at my wits’ end! I simply don’t know what to do!”

By the time she finished, she was audibly sobbing. I was at a loss as to what to say to the crying princess on the other side of the door. While I stood there in worried silence, His Highness took the opportunity to interrupt.

“Henri, suggesting that you cannot control your feelings *is* whining, plain and simple. How is this going to fix things? Shutting yourself away will solve nothing. You must adapt to the situation and work toward a solution. Only a child sits there blubbering and waiting for someone to come save them. You’re twenty years old, Henri. You’re a grown woman.”

“I know that! I know all of that, but there’s nothing I can do about it!”

“That’s enough. You can’t say that you understand while eschewing all expectations of the royal family. It seems you never grasped the significance of this engagement. You merely had your head in the clouds. Now you’ve finally been brought back down to earth, and you’re letting the shock push everything

else out of the equation. I can't allow you to sit around sulking like this. If you truly do see how pathetic it is—if you're sorry for your behavior—then open the door and come out this instant."

Before I could interject to criticize him for being too harsh, a remarkably angry bellow came from beyond the door. "How dare *you* of all people say that? Severin, you're the one person in no position to judge me!"

"Excuse me?!"

"How long did you selfishly avoid any and all potential matches? How much consternation have you caused Mother and Father over the years? All when the crown prince should be the *most* conscious of his royal responsibility!"

He groaned, his breath catching in his throat. He'd taken a rather pointed arrow square in the vitals, turning the tables in an instant. As his face reddened, his sister delivered an additional blow.

"So what if I'm twenty? You were almost twenty-eight when you got engaged!"

Another strained grunt came from the prince.

"You rejected each and every candidate presented to you, *insisting* on a romantic connection! Now that you've finally found success and gotten engaged to your beloved, I'm sure you're awfully happy! A perfect time to lecture me about *my* responsibility!"

As he made yet another defeated sound, a frosty air spread across the women in the room. Princess Henriette was quite right, of course. Those in glass houses shouldn't throw stones.

The housemaids started whispering among themselves...

"That's true. It's a rather selfish approach."

"The royal family *does* have responsibilities, but surely that applies as much to him as it does to her."

"If there's a fuss to be made, it should be about His Highness's situation rather than the princess's, shouldn't it?"

Shrinking back, His Highness was met by cold glares from Julianne and me as

well. Sweat beaded on his handsome face. “I do apologize,” he murmured. “I may have been a tad harsh. Still, it’s not as though your feelings have been ignored altogether. Other proposals came as well, and among them, you were fondest of Prince Liberto. You were taken with his portrait the moment you saw it. Both Father and I did our level best to marry you off to someone you liked.”

“Honestly, Severin, shut up! I don’t want to hear your voice any longer! Go away!”

“Henri... You’re so...” Such rejection from his adorable youngest sister sent him staggering backward.

Supporting his friend with an arm around his shoulders, Lord Simeon sighed and entered the fray. “Your Highness,” he said to the princess, “you’ve allowed yourself to become too agitated. Perhaps you should calm down before—”

“You’re trying to be the voice of reason, Simeon, but what makes you any different? You’re a twenty-seven-year-old adolescent who spent three years chasing his first love around without even realizing it. Frankly, you’re dangerously close to being a pervert!”

An arrow straight to Lord Simeon’s chest. “A...what?!” Both the prince and his knight had been fatally wounded in spectacular fashion, utterly defeated by the princess.

“It’s almost sickening to think of a twenty-four-year-old falling for a fifteen-year-old and watching her all the time! Be grateful that you’re so dashing handsome! You would be looked at very differently if you weren’t!”

Well, if she hadn’t felled him already, she certainly has now. As the master and servant wordlessly sank without a trace, I surreptitiously wiped some tears from my face. An effortless victory on the princess’s part. As fine and dashing as they appear on the surface, merely confronting them with their own actions is enough to make them crumble as quickly as any man.

Behind us, a new arrival burst into laughter. I turned to see Prince Liberto with his entourage. *How long has he been standing there?*

“Prince Liberto!” His Highness said, panicking all of a sudden. “You’ve caught us in a rather embarrassing moment.”

Calming him with a smile, the Lavian prince said, “And I’ve barged in here without asking, so if anything, I’m the one who should apologize. The princess seems to be in quite a state, and when I heard that I was the cause, I couldn’t stand idly by. Presumptuous though it may be, I had to come speak with her.”

Even in this situation, he still wore the same flawless smile. With a faint hint of discomfiture and his eyebrows drooping apologetically, you would never guess it was a facade. He looked just like a faithful prince rushing to his fiancée’s side. However, everyone who’d been listening to the conversation thus far now harbored doubts about him. Though our bystanders had yet to make up their minds about the accuracy of the princess’s accusations, no one was inclined to take the prince’s attitude at face value.

A certain awkwardness hung in the air. Prince Liberto himself couldn’t ignore it and looked ill at ease now. It was the natural reaction in this circumstance, but I still couldn’t tell whether it represented his genuine feelings or if he was still putting on an act.

Probably the latter, I suppose. When I look back on all the wiles he’s employed so far, this shouldn’t be enough to unnerve him. For the briefest of moments, his turquoise eyes looked my way. I was only mildly sorry for the cold, unfeeling gaze I shot him back. His treatment of Grace had got my hackles up slightly, so I wasn’t in a mood to show him much sympathy.

“Princess,” he began, knocking on the door. “Would you mind opening up? I’d like a chance to speak face-to-face, not just through the door. I sincerely apologize for my own shortcomings. I’d like to hear out your feelings, and if there’s any misunderstanding, please allow me the chance to clear it up.”

The voice from beyond the door that had been so spirited moments ago was entirely absent now. She didn’t open the door either, meeting his request with pure silence.

“Please, Princess. It pains me for you to suspect me so. We’ll be married soon, and we’ll be spending our entire lives together. How can I be comfortable with that if you’re unable to trust me? Whatever questions you have, I will answer. I’ll respond honestly to all your concerns and put in every effort I can to dispel your reservations. I only wish you would open the door.”

I was certain that Princess Henriette was holding her breath as she listened from the other side. She wanted to believe him, but she couldn't. She was paralyzed with turmoil over these thoughts. *It's honestly like a scene from a play. The prince is ardently entreating his love to listen to him. If I didn't know any of the background, my heart would probably be racing right now.*

Julianne gently prodded me and whispered, "Marielle, does this remind you of anything?"

"I was thinking the same thing," I whispered back. "That classic tale."

"The Boy Who Cried Wolf."

"The story of a liar who no one believed anymore."

His Highness shushed us with a warning gesture, but I was sure that everyone present was thinking roughly the same thing. When lying becomes second nature, how could you expect others to believe anything you had to say? Prince Liberto was indeed a good liar. It came so naturally that he did it without any indication and with no apparent guilt. He was so good at it, in fact, that he'd actually ended up digging himself into a hole.

His efforts to persuade the princess could well have been genuine, but no one would readily believe it. We were right to be suspicious, to wonder if this was another of his lies designed to get his way. The prince himself was the one who'd made us all so wary. If he had been more honest from the start, showing his true face rather than a mask of amiability, things wouldn't have turned out this way.

The expression "hoisted by your own petard" springs to mind.

"Henri," Prince Severin began, rejoining the effort to coax her out, "you should at least have a proper conversation with him. There'll be no progress otherwise. You surely don't mean to lock yourself away forever, do you?"

He looked my way, as if to enlist my assistance. *Excuse me? Don't expect me to help you. If I have to pick between Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto, I shall side with the princess every time, and it's been that way from the start.*

Both Julianne and I looked away, leaving Prince Severin adrift. Being forsaken by his fiancée was yet another devastating blow. Unable to simply stand by,

Lord Simeon called my name, about to spring into some sort of rebuke. However, he was interrupted by a dignified voice that immediately silenced the chattering crowd.

“What is going on here? There’s quite a clamor.”

My back straightened reflexively. *That voice!* Everyone turned at once to show the queen due deference. Even both princes present moved away from the door for now and bowed.

“I’m told that Henriette has locked herself in her chambers.”

“Yes,” His Highness replied, his expression suggesting a measure of panic. “We’re just persuading her to come out.”

So word of this even reached Her Majesty’s ears. I wonder if everyone in the palace knows by now. If it leaks beyond that, the gossip rags are sure to have a field day.

“What is the cause of this?” she asked.

His Highness hesitated a moment. “Wedding jitters, one might say.”

I wondered if I should try convincing Princess Henriette to relent for the time being after all. *Maybe she’ll listen if I reassure her that I’ll steadfastly remain on her side.*

Such thoughts were still whirring in my mind when the queen addressed me directly.

“Marielle,” she said.

“Oh! Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Do you know the particulars? I’d like you to explain the situation to me, please.”

Lord Simeon stepped in front of me, raising his voice in an effort to halt the queen. “Your Majesty, I don’t believe my wife would be capable of an impartial and objective explanation.”

The queen rebuked him rather firmly. “I don’t recall giving you permission to speak, Lieutenant Colonel.”

After a moment's pause, Lord Simeon was compelled to say, "My apologies, Your Majesty."

My word! The queen is so regal, so imposing. One brief sentence is enough to drive back Lord Simeon.

Weathering his apprehensive gaze, I approached the queen. Prince Severin's face, too, urged me not to say anything inappropriate. *They're frightfully rude, the both of them! I certainly can give an impartial explanation—and what would be wrong with that? Just you watch.*

"Allow me, Your Majesty," I began with a curtsy. "To sum up the situation in a few words, this is a lesson in the importance of honesty."

Lord Simeon cradled his head in his hands. Meanwhile, Prince Liberto maintained his iron mask. *I'm talking to you, I thought. Listen well!*

"Prince Liberto is very good at separating his inner and outer personas, which is an excellent quality to possess in the world of politics. I applaud him for that. However, it may be less beneficial in his personal relationships. Even though their engagement was agreed upon for political reasons, the two of them will be married for the rest of their lives and will need to support one another in all matters. It's essential that they forge a trusting bond, yet Princess Henriette is plagued by doubts about the prince's true feelings. She's become unable to believe the smiles he shows her."

Her Majesty silently nodded in a demand for me to continue.

"They've only just met in person, which puts them at a stage where they should be getting to know one another. If all he reveals to her is his outer mask, it's only natural that she'd struggle to trust anything he says or does. When recent events occurred that cannot be discussed in public—you'll have heard about them already, so I shall say no more—Princess Henriette understood the reasoning behind his actions and saw no need to criticize him. However, the prince approaches her with the same countenance as he did that matter. It's left her anxious that he doesn't see her as an individual woman and his future life partner, but purely as a political tool. She fully understands her duty as a princess, and she knows better than anyone that she must accept that, but she cannot keep her heartache at bay. She's also beset by self-reproach, finding her

own reaction rather pathetic, and this has put her in very low spirits. Her worries have left her in a state of turmoil, so she's locked herself away in her chambers, feeling that she couldn't meet with Prince Liberto. She's said that she doesn't mean to reject him—merely that she doesn't know how to face him.”

The queen let out a small, exasperated sigh. “I see.”

I wondered who that exasperation was directed toward. Both fiancé and fiancée were plausible options.

First, she turned to Prince Liberto and apologized. “Oh dear. This must have caused you quite some consternation—a royal princess acting like a child. I'm very sorry indeed.”

Regardless of the cause, there was no denying that this was an embarrassing incident for our royal family. It was the proper place to begin as both a mother and a queen.

The prince wore an earnest-looking expression as he replied, “Not at all. The misunderstanding was my fault.”

Declaring this a “misunderstanding” was highly dubious, but I suppressed the urge to point that out. I'd already given the answer demanded of me, so it was not my place to interject any further. *See, Lord Simeon? See, Your Highness? I can exercise sensible judgment!*

“Despite my personal chagrin about the insufficiency of my daughter's upbringing, Marielle is quite correct to say that marriage is a bond built on trust. And this is no normal marriage, of course. You will be the grand duke and duchess, responsible for safeguarding the nation of Lavia and helping it flourish. In addition to being husband and wife, you will be ruling together. A lack of mutual trust will challenge your reign. In order to maintain favorable relations with Lagrange and countless other nations, the two of you must first forge a strong relationship.”

“Yes,” the prince replied after a moment.

“If you mean to take Henriette not just as a decorative trinket but as a true partner, surely you'd be happy to give a demonstration of your sincerity.”

“Of course.” He agreed immediately, not a hint of doubt or uncertainty on his

face.

I did detect some small measure of vigilance, however. While presenting her words as mere advice from an elder, Her Majesty was driving the point home rather firmly. Essentially, she was saying that if Prince Liberto treated Princess Henriette indifferently, Lagrange would have something to say about it. I could tell that he was secretly girding his loins to learn what she expected of him as a show of his sincerity.

The queen, meanwhile, wore a broad grin that screamed, *This is what a real public-facing smile looks like.*

“A prince trying to rescue a princess must overcome numerous obstacles to reach her, and in doing so, he shows his passion and devotion—as I’d like you to show yours. You must reach Henriette yourself. There can be no delegating the task to someone else.”

Unable to grasp her meaning, the prince let out a vague sound of assent. Frankly, I was also struggling to follow.

Prince Severin looked bewildered. “Mother?” He always addressed her formally as “Your Majesty” outside of a private context, but he’d inadvertently fallen back on the familial term.

Her Majesty turned to look around at everyone present, ready to explain. “I mean exactly as I say. With Henriette locked away, Prince Liberto must reach her himself. Oh, though perhaps a change of venue is in order. It would be difficult to stage here, so I’d suggest a building in the northern gardens...the Tour de Prison.”

Murmuring broke out around me. I was rather shocked myself. *Really? The Tour de Prison?*

“It’s an annex on the palace grounds not far from the guest quarters. We’ll be secluded enough there that it won’t matter if there’s a great loud fuss.”

Prince Liberto, unfamiliar with the location, cocked his head. “Is that so?”

I could picture the building she was talking about in my head. It was rather beautiful from the outside, actually.

“But...wait,” the prince continued. “Or rather, could I please ask you to wait, Your Majesty? Surely if she’s locked up inside that tower, reaching her will be impossible!”

“Why should it be impossible? There’s a door as well as windows.”

“Certainly, but—”

“Of course, you should assume that you cannot simply enter through the door. It will be locked, just as this one is now. I wouldn’t worry, however. With a ladder, you’ll be able to climb to the third floor. Also, though I said you must reach her yourself, I permit you to receive assistance from others. Henriette is allowed the same, of course.”

The ladies-in-waiting and housemaids all looked at one another and broke out into chatter again. If both sides were allowed to have helpers, did that mean there would be far greater obstacles than merely a locked door?

The door to Princess Henriette’s chambers opened a tiny sliver and she peered out. “Mother?” she said with some trepidation. Prince Liberto turned to look at her. When their eyes met, she jumped and quickly shut the door tight once more. A moment later, though, she ever-so- gingerly opened it again, still only a crack.

“Well, Henriette? Will you surrender now, or will you have him demonstrate his sincerity? The choice is yours.”

“Are you...” She swallowed. “Are you certain this is all right?”

Her Majesty now looked at the princess as a mother regarding her daughter. The gentle wry smile in her eyes said, *What am I going to do with you?*

“Give him everything you have—just this once,” she urged her daughter with a nod. She then turned to glance at Prince Liberto. “You take heed as well. Your behavior has been akin to lying to make yourself look better. Marriage involves learning each other’s true natures, no matter what those may be. Rather than letting disillusionment tear you apart, use this opportunity to bare your heart to her. If not, then that will be the end of things. I’ll take it to mean that Lavia does not consider its relationship with Lagrange to be worth the effort of climbing a ladder.”

Goodness, more naked aggression. Could it be that Her Majesty is actually quite miffed? Perhaps she's not best pleased about his chosen method of dealing with Grace.

"Well, Prince Liberto?" she pressed. "Will you retract your offer to demonstrate your sincerity?"

After the briefest pause, he replied, "No."

The prince had accepted Her Majesty's challenge. In theory, Lavia had the option of walking away from this tie to the Lagrangian royal family and forging a bond with Easdale instead. However, after all that had been said here, he likely felt unable to back down now. If he refused, it would suggest he had no sincerity toward the princess after all. For his country's honor and his own personal pride, he was committed.

His beautiful smile unchanged, he declared firmly, "No matter what, I will reach the princess. Your Highness, if I kneel before you and take your hand, will that clear away your gloom and allow you to see me as a man worthy of spending your life with?"

No girl could possibly resist such ardently romantic words from a man with his peerless looks and smile. Princess Henriette, still peering through the cracked door, turned bright red. She didn't make a sound; she merely nodded, trembling.

Though I had been only watching up to this point, I now stepped forward. *I heard that declaration of intent!* I wanted to exclaim. *We all heard it! Every last word!*

Sensing my motives, Lord Simeon immediately reached out to try to draw me back, but I would not be silenced. Before he could grab me, I raised my voice. "I, Marielle Flaubert, will aid Her Highness!"

"Marielle!" my husband cried.

"Her Majesty said that help was permitted!" I continued, fending off his hands at all costs as they tried to cover my mouth. "I will serve as Princess Henriette's ally!"

How could I live with myself if I didn't stand up for her now? A dear friend is

facing a do-or-die moment of truth! Of course I'll stand by her side!

"Oh! Me too!" said Julianne, raising her hand. "I'll help too!"

Prince Severin's eyes bulged. "What are you doing, Julianne?!"

"Princess Henriette will be my sister-in-law soon. I wish to support her!"

I shook off Lord Simeon and clapped my hands against Julianne's. We then linked hands and turned to face our respective loved ones.

"I'm sorry, Lord Simeon, but I have to fight for my friend's happiness. I'm afraid I'll be away from home just for a little bit."

"Apologies for my impulsive decision, Your Highness. There are times when women must band together."

"Marielle..."

"Julianne..."

My best friend and I went to the princess's door and opened it wider. Though she was entirely flustered, we took her by the hand and pulled her outside.

"Will you allow us to help you?" I asked.

"Help me? I barely even know what this will involve. I hate to think that I've dragged the two of you into it."

"Please, drag us into it!" Julianne insisted. "You're to be my sister-in-law. I want to develop a closer relationship with you!"

The princess's eyes grew moist. This moment of good cheer among women, however, was interrupted by the arrival of a rather large figure.

"I am here to serve!" the mustached older gentleman bellowed jovially. "I too will assist the princess! Please take me with you!"

"Captain?!" said Lord Simeon, his voice cracking.

Indeed, that spirited, spontaneous declaration of support had come from none other than Captain Poisson of the Royal Order of Knights.

Shocked, Lord Simeon vehemently objected, "Don't simply assign yourself to this because it looks like good fun! You have work to do!"

“This is part of my job, wouldn’t you say? Guarding the princess is exactly what a royal guard should be doing.” He chortled with glee.

“Your job is to command, not to work in the field!”

“Ugh, I hate how stubborn you can be. All that can wait.” The Captain’s previously mirthful face was suddenly overtaken with a serious expression, and he put a hand on his chest as he delivered a decidedly chivalric bow. “Your Highness, I heartily entreat you to accept me as your personal knight.”

Though taken aback by the sudden impressive display, the princess replied, “No.”

“What?” he gasped.

“We can’t have him, can we?” the princess asked, turning to me for confirmation.

I nodded and agreed. “We cannot.”

This twofold rejection left the Captain lamenting in an exaggerated manner. “Whyever not?! Princess, are you saying that I, your humble servant Poisson, am not good enough?!”

“Well, it’s... It’s more that...”

I took it upon myself to explain. “You’re a very dependable knight, Captain. I have nothing but the greatest esteem for you as my husband’s superior officer. This, however, is an entirely separate matter. Letting a shrewd old fox into the fray would be risky for us indeed. I can picture a future where the fortress is destroyed from the inside. That’s why it’s most prudent for us to decline.”

“I’m sorry, Albert,” the princess added.

We each crossed our arms in front of us in a large X. The Captain tottered backward—then turned to look toward the far end of the corridor.

“It was no use, Your Majesty,” he said. “These women are too clever.”

“No! Don’t draw attention to me!” Peeking from around a corner was the kingdom’s most preeminent figure. When his daughter spotted him, he frantically began making an excuse. “It’s not how it looks, Henri! I’m on your side too. I just think some adult supervision would be good, that’s all...”

“I’m twenty years old and my marriage is on the line. I can do without adult supervision, thank you very much.”

Another grown man was sharply rebuffed—this time the king by his own daughter. The queen sighed again, even more exasperated now. Prince Severin and Lord Simeon had their heads in their hands, while we three young ladies stood hand in hand, united. One by one, the ladies-in-waiting and housemaids also declared their own willingness to participate. Among the Lavian party, who had been left standing stock-still as the conversation unfolded, Prince Liberto alone was watching the proceedings with a smile.

I took a surreptitious glance at him. *How long will he remain completely unruffled? I hope he doesn’t think he’ll have an easy victory because we’re young women. We won’t let you reach Princess Henriette that easily.*

Naturally, I didn’t want to break the couple apart. Quite the opposite—I wanted to bring them closer together. Only, in spite of that...or rather, *because* of that, we needed to break the prince’s iron mask. Otherwise they would never be able to have a happy future together.

We got to work straight away. After quickly gathering what we needed and making arrangements for more supplies to be sent later if what we had didn’t suffice, we made our way to the annex in the northern gardens. The square building had the appearance of a relatively ordinary guesthouse, but it was exceptionally tall. It rose up five stories, with the only proper entrance being a single front door. Every wall and window was elegantly and meticulously decorated, but the panes on the first floor were all covered with ornate yet sturdy bars, permitting no entry or exit.

Once, noble prisoners had been held captive here. The building’s history as well as its outer appearance had led to a nickname which, though meant somewhat ironically, had stuck firmly. When talking about famous points of interest at the palace, this location always came up—the Tour de Prison. The prison tower.

Chapter Fourteen

The challenge was scheduled to last from lunch that afternoon to teatime the following day. The prince was set to return to Lavia the day after that, so time was limited by necessity—not that there was any need to prolong things. The simple goal was for the prince to demonstrate his tenacity and true self to Princess Henriette, after all.

As for us ladies, we'd brought food and a change of clothes with us, so we spent that night together in the tower sharing a bed. Julianne and I used to do something similar before I was married, and the princess was excited to gain a new experience. We chatted about all kinds of things before drifting off, and in the morning she seemed to have cheered up considerably. She ate breakfast looking wholly refreshed.

Looking down from the third-story window, I could see knights posted on guard outside. No doubt the Captain or Lord Simeon had ordered the detail since our team consisted entirely of women, and any risk of harm to the princess—however remote—had to be excluded. As heartening as this was, I had to account for the possibility that they might yet end up our enemies. Her Majesty hadn't set any restrictions about who could join which side. Prince Severin, who wished to see the situation resolved as expeditiously as possible, could have aligned himself with Prince Liberto. By extension, we couldn't count on the knights' support.

Sophie had happened to walk over to the window as well, so I inquired of her, "Do you suppose we could ask for a large quantity of oil?"

"Oil?" she repeated.

"Yes. Could we have it delivered?"

"I'm sure we could. Is there anything else that you'd— Oh?"

She stopped short upon spying another figure approaching the building from outside. It wasn't Prince Liberto. Rather, this was someone in a dress—a black-

haired woman accompanied by a lady-in-waiting.

“Henri!” called her relaxed voice from the ground.

Princess Henriette came over and peered through the window. “Lucienne!”

“Good morning. How are you?”

The woman on the ground was her older sister, Princess Lucienne, wife to Duke Chaliar. She must have been informed about all this by their mother, the queen.

Princess Lucienne pointed to the large basket her lady-in-waiting was holding. “I’ve brought supplies.”

“Thank you!”

“No need to open the door if you can help it. Do you have a way to pull this up to the window?”

The housemaids bustled about to find rope. When we gathered up all the cords holding up the curtains and bed canopy and tied them together, the result was just about long enough to reach the ground. We dangled it down for it to be tied to the handle of the basket. Though I wondered if all this was really necessary, everyone seemed to be having a great deal of fun as they diligently hoisted up the basket.

“I’ll be cheering you on!” called the older princess. “Don’t give up!”

“Thank you, Lucienne!” said her sister.

“By the way, there’s a present from Duke Silvestre in there as well. Make good use of it!”

That name alone sent a shiver through me. Julianne suddenly let out a yelp. “Oh no! I didn’t ask permission from my adoptive parents!”

“Well,” I said after a moment to consider, “it doesn’t sound as though they’re overly upset.”

From under the mountain of food inside the basket, I pulled out a sturdily bound book.

“*The Art of Withstanding a Siege*,” Julianne read.

“I’d say your adoptive father is giving you all the support he can muster.”

It was a manual on tactics, complete with diagrams. The duke could be capricious to say the least, but it seemed he’d taken an interest in our predicament. I decided I’d gratefully use this as a reference.

After Princess Lucienne, another visitor came bearing a large basket. He wore the same white uniform as the knights on guard, and his pale blond hair gleamed in the morning sunlight. After exchanging salutes with his subordinates, he looked up at me. “Marielle!”

“Good morning, Lord Simeon. My apologies for leaving you alone last night.”

“I wasn’t the only lonely one at home. Chouchou awaited your return and was sorely disappointed. It’s all well and good for you to support Her Highness, but there’s no need for you to be locked up in there with her. Please come out.”

Another figure lingered behind him, hiding behind the shrubbery and sculptures in the garden. *How silly. You’re entirely visible from up here.*

“I’d like to support her more directly than that. You’ll have to forgive me.”

“Honestly, Marielle.” He put his basket on the ground and untied the string that was keeping the lid closed. From inside, he took out something white and held it up high so I could see. “Look at her! See how she’s sulking now that you’ve abandoned her?”

“Goodness, a cat!” cried Sophie.

The other ladies-in-waiting crowded around the window. “A cat? Ooh, where?” cooed one.

“I don’t think she’s sulking,” said another. “She just looks annoyed at being picked up like that.”

I, meanwhile, moved away from the window and ran down to the second floor in a hurry. Then, in the room directly below, I charged over to the window facing the same direction and threw it open. “Lord Simeon! Why have you brought Chouchou here?”

“Look how she’s lost weight. Look how her fur has lost its luster. It’s your fault.”

Then the knights on guard made their own observations...

“She looks entirely healthy to me.”

“What a nice, fluffy-looking cat.”

“Though she does seem rather annoyed with you, sir.”

We feed her well, you know. An earldom can afford to.

“As her mother, doesn’t it pain you to see your precious little girl in such a state?” my husband entreated. “Even when you didn’t return home, she still believed you’d come. She wouldn’t get under the covers when I called.”

“‘Mother’?” said one of the men. “Does that make you her father, Vice Captain?”

“You sound like a husband whose wife has left him,” remarked another.

“She wouldn’t even sleep in his bed, hmm? The Vice Captain is the one who’s really sulking.”

Leaning as far out of the window as I could, I extended my hands and called down to the cat. “Don’t worry, Chouchou! Mama is right here! Come on!”

“What do you mean, ‘come on’? You’re the one who’s supposed to— Chouchou, stop!” Though Lord Simeon tried to keep a hold on the wildly flailing cat, she soon escaped his grasp. He grunted as she slipped away and ran to the wall, then pushed off the ground with a burst of energy.

Cries of admiration came from both above and below.

“Wow!”

“Incredible!”

In a remarkable feat of strength, Chouchou used the bars and exterior adornments on the building as footholds to reach the window in a mere handful of leaps.

“Good girl!” I praised her, scooping her up and nuzzling my cheek against her. “Sorry for leaving you home alone. There, there. I’m sorry, precious!”

She clung on to me, her claws bared. The poor thing was terrified to be dragged to this strange new place. As I comforted her, the chorus of knights

began commenting again.

“Oof, seeing that makes me understand why the Vice Captain’s sulking.”

“Her cat comes when *she* calls it.”

“You’d almost think she loves it more than him.”

As my husband clenched his fists, I told him, “I was worried about her, so I’m very happy to see her, but I must ask that you not take her out unnecessarily. In general, cats shouldn’t be taken for walks like dogs are, and if you do take them out, you should definitely use a lead. If you try to hold her in your arms, she’ll run off as she did just now. If she were to get lost in an unfamiliar place, she’d never find her way home. Please be careful.”

“Marielle, I...” he began uncertainly.

I closed the window and went back up to the third floor. From outside, I could hear His Highness shouting, “I can’t believe you let her get away, you nincompoop! All you’ve done is bring Marielle a present!”

“My apologies,” came the slow reply.

“You told me this would be the best way to convince Marielle. This operation hinges on whether she’s inside or out. It’s vital to separate my sister from her lieutenant!”

So that’s what this is all about. I thought as much.

When I returned to the room upstairs, the group of women who’d been watching through the window crowded around me, exclaiming in shrill tones.

“Her name’s Chouchou, is it? She’s adorable!”

“Eek! How soft and fluffy she is!”

“What a cute little kitty.”

Princess Henriette looked at the dog sitting dutifully at her feet. “Do you suppose she’ll get along with Pearl?”

The two animals locked eyes. The dog and cat, both roughly the same size, each reacted in their own way.

“Honestly, don’t huff at her!” I scolded Chouchou. “We’re the guests here.”

“Goodness, I see you want to play,” the princess said to Pearl. “Be nice to her.”

Though the cat’s fur stood on end threateningly, the dog rolled over to expose her belly. *I suppose I should expect as much from their first meeting.* After watching long enough to assure myself that they wouldn’t start fighting, I returned to the window.

Preparations were underway below. Attendants had brought out not only ladders, but a great quantity of soft furnishings as well, which they were piling up with the assumption that Prince Liberto might take a tumble during his climb. As I watched them work, I pondered. *A three-story fall must be quite dangerous. The prince doesn’t look anything like a trained military officer who might be used to such a thing. He strikes me as more the literary type. If we’re making efforts to knock him down, we should probably limit them to the second floor and below.*

In a way, this was ultimately a farce. A challenge with so much meticulous assistance from his team was no challenge at all in the real sense. Yet what I wanted from Prince Liberto was not to see him overcome an arduous ordeal. My one and only goal was to arrive at an ending that Princess Henriette could accept.

We were also busy discussing things and making preparations of our own. As noon approached, the princess grew increasingly restless. “I’m so unsure about this,” she confessed to Sophie. “Is it really all right to go ahead with it?”

“Don’t fret,” the lady-in-waiting replied soothingly, bidding her sit down in a chair. “The king and queen both approved of it, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

Chouchou and Pearl were chasing each other around by the princess’s feet now. Julianne came closer to me and whispered so that she wouldn’t hear, “I realize we’re supposed to obstruct him, but we shouldn’t completely hinder him, should we? Then it wouldn’t be a challenge as much as it would be dooming their engagement.”

“Correct. One way or another, Prince Liberto *must* reach the princess. Our hurdles must be low enough to be surmountable.”

“It’s a difficult balance. We mustn’t go too far, but if this is too easy for him, then the whole endeavor is meaningless.”

“We’ll have to observe his progress carefully and accommodate as we go.”

Once everything was ready, we had nothing to do but eat a slightly early lunch and wait. Finally, the appointed hour for the showdown came upon us. A crowd consisting of more royal guards, Lord Simeon and Prince Severin, and Prince Liberto and his entourage gathered below our window.

After being rebuffed by both teams, Captain Poisson had put himself forward as umpire. Raising his voice for everyone to hear, he announced, “Well then, before we begin, let’s go over the rules one more time. The time limit is three hours. The challenge ends as soon as Prince Liberto enters the room. Other than the south-facing window on the third floor, there are no valid entry points. That window must remain open, and conversely, the glass must not be broken by the prince’s team. In general, any manner of assistance and hindrance is permitted, but neither side may use any live weapons, and I shall issue a warning if any other measures are deemed overly dangerous. All agreed?”

The participants on both sides agreed to these terms.

“Others may climb up partway to assist Prince Liberto. However, only the prince himself may lay a hand on the window. All interference must also stop at the point when he touches it. Any obstructions beyond that point will be considered infractions. That’s everything. Any questions?”

“No!” came a collective cry from the group of men.

I, on the other hand, raised my hand. “Yes! Can you confirm that as long as we’re not posing any danger, we won’t be reprimanded no matter what we do? We won’t be accused of treason or some such?”

“Sounds fine to me.” He turned a questioning gaze on Prince Liberto. “Agreed?”

As was only fitting, the prince had arrived dressed more comfortably than his normal attire. His footwear looked like hunting boots—they laced all the way up—and his hair was tied back to keep it out of his face. His expression as he looked up at us was difficult to make out at this distance, but I was fairly sure he

was wearing a dauntless smile too.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “I accepted this challenge, so I’ll make no further complaints. Whatever impediments are presented, I shall overcome them.”

“I’d advise *far* more caution than that,” His Highness commented derisively. “That one may look sweet and innocent, but she’s anything but.”

I decided to ignore his tone and thank him for the compliment. “Much appreciated, Your Highness!”

What mattered was that I’d received that commitment. Now there was no need to hold back.

While His Highness put a frustrated hand over his face, Lord Simeon stood next to him looking thoroughly resigned. He was leaning against a garden tree with his arms folded, his posture that of a mere spectator. Further back, tea tables had been set up where the king, the queen, and the older princess were sitting to watch the proceedings.

“In that case,” the Captain proclaimed, “begin!”

His command was powerful enough to shake the air—and with that, the prince’s team immediately got to work. They propped a ladder up against the wall, and several members of Prince Liberto’s party braced it for support. They struggled, however, to keep it steady.

“What’s the problem?” asked the prince.

“We’re trying...but the ladder is sliding around for some reason!”

The ladder extended to slightly below the third-floor windowsill. If the prince stretched from the top of it, he would easily be able to reach his goal. Upon close inspection, however, the wall around that area was glimmering slickly.

I chuckled. “I’d hold on very tight if I were you. It would be awful if the ladder were to slip out from under you.”

The jars of oil and brushes that we’d had delivered to us that morning were littered around our feet. We hadn’t just whiled our hours away chatting to each other. We’d made thorough preparations.

The men finally stabilized the ladder, but it took quite a few of them to keep a

grip on it. Prince Liberto put a foot on the rungs, then slowly, carefully, began to ascend. As I expected, he wasn't nearly as nimble as the knights. *He hasn't looked down even once. Could he be scared of heights, maybe?*

Standing around the base of the ladder, everyone from the prince's retinue who wasn't immediately lending a hand watched on with visible anxiety. The knights did too.

When Prince Liberto reached approximately the second floor window, I picked up a sack and said, "Here we go, then. I hope you're ready."

Careful to avoid spilling its contents all at once, I gave the bag a shake to disperse the powder as widely as possible. The prince had evidently expected something like this, and he began to move back down the ladder to avoid a direct hit. Sadly for him, the powder raining down from overhead still left him groaning and spluttering.

The fine dust hit his head and his shoulders before floating back up into the air, where it caught in his nose and throat. He tried holding his breath, but the air was still filled with the stuff for long enough that he could do nothing to avoid inhaling it. Soon he was coughing and sneezing uncontrollably.

Our first volley was a thoroughly orthodox approach—a pepper attack. Not only was our foe entirely halted in his ascent, but each time he sneezed, it shook the ladder. On the verge of falling, he clung to it tightly, but then another sneeze erupted. The men bracing the ladder below were also shaken by the sliding at the top, which sent them into a panic. Cries of "Ahh!" and "Watch out!" rose up.

At last, the ladder leaned heavily to one side. Unable to hold on any longer, Prince Liberto fell. Royal guards standing ready with a quilt stretched it out to catch him. The prince quickly got to his feet again, prompting sighs of relief all around. Princess Henriette, who'd been glued to the window, also sank weakly to the floor. She might have been the palest of all.

"Surely that's against the rules!" Prince Severin complained to Captain Poisson.

"No, I'd say it's within bounds."

“But—”

“With hindrances in play, we must expect a tumble or two. That said, *your* team had better make sure he doesn’t get injured. Men, if you don’t catch him properly, heads will roll! I mean that literally!”

The Captain’s glare made the royal guards jump with a start. “Yes, sir!” Some of them shot reproachful glances up at me as well.

Sorry! I’ll do my best to minimize the danger, I promise.

Prince Liberto’s men assiduously brushed off the pepper clinging to him. During this lull, I took the opportunity to double-check the next treat I had waiting in the wings.

“I’m impressed to see you treating *him* that way,” said someone behind me with a hint of laughter. “You’re not afraid of anything, are you?”

“Believe me, this is only the—”

I stopped short when it registered. That was a man’s voice—one I shouldn’t have been hearing. When I turned around, Lutin was sitting on a table in an ill-mannered fashion. Everyone else in the room was shocked to notice him too.

“Who is this?”

“When did he get here?!”

He jumped down from the table and gave an affected bow. “My apologies for sneaking in without permission, Your Highness. I am Emidio Cialdini of Lavia.”

“Oh,” the princess replied with realization. “You were there the other day.”

“I was indeed. I’m grateful for the hospitality you’ve shown my master.”

“No, I’m the one who should be expressing my gratitude. You saved me from great peril.”

“This is hardly the time for polite introductions,” I objected. “The only valid entrance is the window! Entering by any other route is against the rules!”

As I looked around for anything I could use as a weapon, Lutin raised his hands to show he had no ill will. “You’ve got it all wrong. I didn’t come to interfere in the challenge.”

He stayed standing where he was, giving no indication of coming any closer. I carefully put down the oil jar I had picked up.

“Then why *did* you come?”

“Purely to get a good look at the situation. Also to observe my master’s valiant struggle from above.”

“What a caring subordinate. Won’t he tell you off for this later?”

“Not if he doesn’t see me. I’m here in secret.”

Following that brazen comment, he reclined back upon the table. As if to make his intention to sit back and watch quite clear, he leisurely crossed his long legs. The various women in the room had been first alarmed by the appearance of this unknown man, but now his young and charming appearance had them in a tizzy. He caught the eye of a housemaid and winked at her, and she turned bright red.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Lutin asked me. “Are you jealous?”

“You would see it so conveniently,” I replied. “Surely you know I’m frustrated.”

Still, it seemed he was telling the truth about coming purely to observe. With a shrug of my shoulders, I turned back to the window. I had no time to let Lutin distract me. The ladder had already been propped up for another attempt.

In fact, this time a second ladder was positioned next to the first. While Prince Liberto climbed one, another man ascended alongside him holding an umbrella. This way, anything we dropped from above would be deflected. *It looks like they thought of countermeasures in advance. Does that mean the prince let himself be hit by the pepper attack on purpose? Was he trying to give us an early victory just to make us feel better? How kind.*

On my signal, a housemaid leaned out of the window. Others stood behind her, holding on tightly to ensure that she didn’t fall out. As soon as the man with the umbrella climbed high enough to be within reach, the housemaid began to shake him with all her might.

“W-Wah?! S-S-Stop... Gah!”

He was already in quite an unstable position since he was stretching out sideways to cover Prince Liberto with the umbrella, so it didn't take much pushing to throw him off balance. Within seconds, he was plummeting to the ground. His allies waiting below caught him safely, of course.

Now that the prince was defenseless again, I shot him a smirk. "Initiate the second volley!"

Ladies-in-waiting carrying large tubs approached the window and tipped them over. The contents sloshed out and onto the prince, sending steam rising through the autumn air.

Lutin hopped down from the table. "What? Was that boiling water?"

"Don't be silly. It was only about hot enough for a bath. This book suggested boiling oil, actually."

When I showed Lutin the tome provided by Duke Silvestre, he contorted his face. "Best to avoid that, I think. You'd have deaths on your hands, not even just injuries."

Though drenched from head to toe, Prince Liberto kept a firm grip on the ladder. The men holding it up at the bottom were also stalwart despite their sodden state.

I gave my next order without allowing any time to recover. "Ready the third volley!"

This time, large sacks were brought over and a large quantity of flour was dumped out of them. Naturally, this clung to the soaked prince like glue. His head and his clothes were caked in white. He couldn't even open his eyes like this.

Lutin came to take a peek since his master wouldn't see him now. With a sound of astonishment, he said, "My, Marielle, you're really showing no mercy."

The prince abandoned his climb for the time being and jumped down from the ladder. He was presented with a towel, which he fastidiously wiped his face with as he ordered the ladders to be replaced with fresh ones.

"Goodness, he looks like a ghost," Lutin remarked. "I'll bet he's *really* annoyed

inside. He detests letting anyone see him in an embarrassing state.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.”

Those who were good at scheming were generally very proud as well. I was certain that the prince, who maintained a flawless smile to the world, was prideful to a fault. My scheme capitalized on that. I aimed to make him look as foolish and ridiculous as possible.

“We’ve made him angry?” Princess Henriette murmured, her tone anxious. “Oh no. I suppose the way we’re treating him *would* be infuriating, wouldn’t it?” Everything we’d unleashed on the prince had stoked her apprehension.

Glancing from her to me, Lutin let out a bitter laugh. “You call me a scoundrel, but now you’ve become the wicked witch. You’ve made off with the princess and locked her away in a tower, and now you’re assaulting the prince trying to rescue her. You’re the clear villain of the piece.”

“I’m glad it appears that way!”

If it looked as though the princess was trying to push the prince away, that would be a serious problem. Which meant she couldn’t be the one to put him through such torment personally. That was a job for the wicked witch—a villain for the prince to save her from.

I took a glance down at Lord Simeon to see what he was doing. He remained in the exact same position, his arms crossed, only he was staring straight up at me. I didn’t fancy my chances of victory if he chose to participate, so I was relieved to see him still standing on the sidelines.

Lutin came up beside me to show his face. When he waved down at Lord Simeon, I pushed him back in a sudden panic. “What are you doing?!”

“Just saying hello.”

“If you’re seen here, the consequences will be disastrous!”

“Not for me. As far as I’m concerned, it doesn’t matter at all if the Vice Captain knows I’m here.”

“Well, it matters to me! You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

“What can I say? It drives me mad to see the Vice Captain looking so calm and

collected.”

“What on earth is that supposed to—”

I suddenly realized that everyone in the room was intently focused on me and Lutin as we argued. Curiosity burned in their eyes.

In a suspicious tone, Julianne said, “I’ve been wondering about this since he arrived, but you two seem awfully close.”

This left me faltering for words. “Well,” I began, my voice hesitant, “I suppose, to some extent.”

Princess Henriette chimed in with a question too. “How did you get so close to one of Prince Liberto’s subordinates?”

I legitimately had no idea what to tell them. “Well, we’ve... We’ve encountered one another on several occasions. It might be better if you ask His Highness about the specific details.”

Wrapping an arm around my shoulders, Lutin gave a *much* franker explanation. “I’m madly in love with her and I try to woo her every time we meet. Recently I managed a promotion to ‘friend’ at last.”

Squeals rang out from the surrounding women.

“Goodness! Is that why he came?!”

“Mrs. Flaubert has more to her than meets the eye!”

“Hold on, though. What about the Vice Captain? This is adultery, isn’t it?”

“An affair? I’m astounded...”

Their minds were quick to run wild into the realm of baseless accusations. “No, that’s not the case at all!” I proclaimed, firmly denying it. “I would never *ever* be unfaithful! Don’t listen to a word he says!”

“How heartless. Didn’t you tell me just recently that you saw me as a friend?”

“I did! Not a lover, not a paramour, but a *friend*! No more and no less. And I would appreciate it if you stopped distracting me at such a critical moment. Julianne!”

“Y-Yes?”

I jabbed a finger in Lutin's direction and informed my best friend, "This man is no ordinary subordinate. He's been a close companion of Prince Liberto's since childhood. In fact, they're close enough that the prince calls him 'Bambino.'"

"Wait, don't tell her that!" Lutin protested.

"What? Really?" asked Julianne, her voice overlapping with his. Her eyes twinkled as if a passionate tale was unfolding in her mind.

Lutin looked her way. He seemed to have sensed something happening.

I turned my back on him and returned to the window. "Why do I have a bad feeling all of a sudden?" When I peered down, I was too scared to even look at Lord Simeon.

What I saw was shocking enough. The new ladders had already arrived, and two had been set up alongside each other just as before. Once again, Prince Liberto was climbing up with an attendant on the ladder next to his. But when I beheld who was supporting the attendant's ladder, I let out a gasp of surprise.

"Hold on, that's—"

It took four men to brace the base of Prince Liberto's ladder, while a lone man held the second—a hulking muscleman to whom no one else could compare.

His bulging muscles were visible through his clothes. The housemaid frantically tried to shake the ladder, but his superhuman strength made that all but impossible. It barely moved an inch.

Reflexively, I turned and accused Lutin. "You said you weren't going to interfere!"

Indeed, the new arrival below, with his familiar blond curls and great pride in his muscles, was Lutin's right-hand man, Dario.

"I'm not doing a thing," he replied, his tone blithe. "I can't speak for what's going on outside. Prince Liberto saved Dario just as he did me, not to mention the prince is the one paying his salary. I'm sure he'll do whatever he's told."

My mouth twisting into a pout, I rushed back to the window and cried, "Dario!" He looked up at me. "You're on fire! Show us what you've got!"

This prompted him to strike a pose. A chorus of oohs and aahs rose up from

the crowd. As he neglected his duty to hold the ladder up, it began to sway. With a yelp, the ascending attendant was thrown to the ground. However, he still fulfilled his task. As he tumbled, he tossed the bag he held in his hand with all his might. His aim was true. The small sack flew through the third-story window and landed on the floor.

Something leaped out from the opening—a creature that began to scuttle about rapidly, making the room explode into screams.

“Aaaaagh!”

“A m-m-m-mouse!”

“Nooooo!”

Honestly, the mouse has far more reason to be upset than we do. It’s been put into a bag, thrown through a window, and now subjected to all this screaming. In a panic, it weaved its way between the feet of the women trying to flee. There was one present, however, who jumped up, eyes gleaming.

As Chouchou gave chase, the room became an ever more chaotic whirlpool of screams and cries of, “No! Stop! Don’t come near me!” The dog grew excited as well and ran after the cat, barking with glee.

I watched, at a loss as to what to do. How could I calm this pandemonium?

“I didn’t expect you’d have a cat here,” Lutin remarked. “You seem ridiculously well prepared. Did you see this coming?”

“Well, no, not at all.” I paused, suddenly unsure. “I don’t think so, anyway.”

It had to be a coincidence, didn’t it? Lord Simeon couldn’t have *intentionally* brought the cat here knowing that a mouse would be released—could he?

“You’re pretty calm around mice.”

“They can be pesky little critters, but they are rather cute to look at— Aagh!”

Chouchou, still fixated on the mouse and nothing else, came charging toward us and knocked into a vase. The elegant container toppled over, colliding with a box on the windowsill. I gasped. It was too late to stop it.



I had been hesitating over whether to unleash this ultimate weapon, but now it had already begun its descent. Slowly, I poked my head through the window to look down. “Oops.”

It landed directly on the head of Prince Liberto, who had climbed past the second floor and was halfway to the third. Inside was soot we’d scraped up from the fireplace, which now covered the prince’s shoulders, rendering them pitch-black.

Even Lutin drew back in shock. “Do you have no mercy at all?”

“I put it there just in case,” I replied, my voice uncertain. “I was starting to think it wouldn’t be necessary.”

“On your head be it,” he said.

The prince had stopped climbing for now. He removed the box from his head and cast it aside without a word. He then briskly resumed climbing. Forgetting all the deliberate prudence he’d used at first, he sped up to the third floor and put his hand on the window ledge.

“Oh!” said Princess Henriette, realization dawning on her as it did the rest of us. The mouse had now gone into hiding behind the furniture, so the room had calmed down by the time Prince Liberto climbed inside.

A victory cheer arose from the ground below. Liberto’s splendid army had achieved a hard-won success. That being said, the prince himself was in a state that could only be called a terrible mess. After being soaked through and caked in flour, he’d now been smothered with soot as well. His entire top half was a black and white patchwork, and his beautiful flaxen hair was unrecognizable. His unmatched beauty was so obscured that I couldn’t even make out his countenance.

Silence fell. As Prince Liberto stood by the window, he and Princess Henriette locked eyes, not saying a word.

The princess opened her mouth, as if driven by an urge to apologize. The words wouldn’t come, however, and her expression changed quite significantly. Though she had looked pale and flustered, her features soon softened and her cheeks flushed. She put a hand over her mouth, but she couldn’t stop a laugh

from escaping. “Pfft... I’m... I’m sorry, I... Heh... Heh heh...”

Despite her best efforts, she was soon shaking with barely-contained chortles. Similar chuckling emerged from the others watching. They all looked away, their hands clasped over their mouths. Some tried turning their backs altogether, but the air of amusement was palpable. That *everyone* was laughing only made it increasingly funnier. Unable to hold it in any longer, Princess Henriette soon burst into loud, raucous peals. “Ha ha ha ha ha! I’m... I’m so sorry, but... Hah... Ha ha ha ha!”

Prince Liberto kept standing there, not making a sound. Ordinarily, a scene like this would have made us shrink back for fear of his anger, but there was no hope of stemming our laughter now that it had broken out. Though the prince was probably grimacing under all the soot, the princess’s mirth continued for quite some time.

When her last giggles finally subsided with a sigh, she said, “Sophie, can you bring Prince Liberto something he can use to clean himself up?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” the lady-in-waiting replied.

She dipped a towel in warm water and presented it to the prince, who wiped his face and hands with it. The towel turned pitch black in an instant. Realizing one would not be enough, Sophie quickly retrieved another.

Once the prince’s good looks had (somewhat) been restored, Princess Henriette gave a deep curtsy. “You did very admirably indeed. I’m grateful to you for not simply leaving when you could easily have done so.” She’d completely regained her composure as she put on an entirely placid smile for the prince. “You’ve made me feel far better, so I must express my sincerest gratitude. You may call off the engagement without reservation. I will talk to Father and Mother myself. After you’ve gone to such lengths, I’m sure they will accept it. Please return to Lavia without any concern.”

During this declaration, she looked around briefly and smiled at everyone present, but the mention of calling off the engagement left us all frozen in shock. After a moment, Sophie stepped forward as if she meant to dissuade the princess. “Your Highness,” she began, but Princess Henriette warded her off.

At last, the prince spoke, his voice a low murmur. “Call off the engagement?”

The smile that was always fixed so permanently to his face was nowhere to be seen, leaving his expression almost terrifyingly blank.

Princess Henriette did not flinch under his cold, piercing gaze. “Yes,” she affirmed. “I’m sure you must be rather upset at the sheer rudeness I’ve shown you. Whatever terms we agreed to, our treatment of you was cruel to an excessive degree—and repeatedly so. It’s only natural that you would be offended.”

Even though I had been the one in charge of all our strategies, the princess put the blame squarely on her own shoulders. She’d remained deeply concerned for Prince Liberto’s well-being all this time, but she breathed not a word of that now. Instead, she was acting as though she had been personally responsible for everything.

“Surely even before this heinous event, you must have been annoyed at my little tantrum. I’m ashamed of myself to realize how thoroughly unprepared I was. The situation could have been resolved simply by giving me a suitable lecture, but instead everyone went along with my whim, including you. I am truly, profoundly grateful. I must also express both my thanks and my apologies to you, Prince Liberto. I’m sincerely sorry for putting you through such torment. I thank you for playing along despite what all this said about me.”

She lowered her head again, and the prince continued to stare fixedly at her in silence. The housemaids and ladies-in-waiting were all holding their breath as well.

Following an eternity of silence, a soft sigh escaped Prince Liberto’s lips. “And now, after all that, I’m supposed to scurry back to Lavia, sad and discarded? That is quite a thing to tell me.”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“If you were going to break off the engagement, I wouldn’t have gone along with this ridiculous charade in the first place.” His turquoise eyes glanced at a mirror on the wall. Catching sight of his own appearance, his well-formed features twisted into a decidedly displeased scowl. “This is the most disgraceful I have ever looked in my entire life. I’ll be honest with you. I am *very* unhappy right now.”

“Y-Yes, of course, you must be. I’m so sorry.”

“This was your intent, wasn’t it?” The prince now turned his gaze on me. There was absolutely no hint of his perfect smile on his face. Instead, he was glaring rather hatefully. Smiling back, I bowed my head. “All your plans were crafted to make me look a fool in order to provoke me to anger.”

Princess Henriette cast her eyes down to the floor too. She seemed stunned into silence.

Sighing again, the prince slowly strode toward her. “I realized that long before the end, but after making a vow before His Majesty, Her Majesty, and His Highness the Crown Prince, I couldn’t simply abandon it. Taking offense and going back on my word would have been even more disgraceful. No matter how foolish I found the whole endeavor, I was forced to see it through until the end.” He paused a moment. “Indeed, that was not out of faithfulness toward you. As Lavia’s future grand duke, I was unable to withdraw.”

“Yes,” she said after a moment.

His slow, reverberating footsteps stopped. The prince stood right in front of Princess Henriette, whose gaze was still fixed on the floor. He looked at his fiancée and said, “To me, you are no more than a golden pawn. The princess of the great power of Lagrange. Unlike my grandfather, I have no particular fascination with women. As long as my wife has the requisite education, knows how to behave herself, and is reasonably presentable in terms of her face and figure, none of the rest matters too much. I find you more than adequate in that regard, so I am not disappointed by any means. What matters above all is the firm guarantee you provide of strong backing from your country.”

She remained silent, but he continued.

“My intention was to behave in as pleasant a manner as possible so that you’d feel entirely happy to marry me. After we are wed, I plan to continue treating you well. I certainly won’t have any affairs or father any illegitimate children either, so you needn’t worry. Those only become a burden, and if I had time for such things, it would be far more valuable for me to spend it balancing the books. Though too much extravagance can be excessive, I will provide you with a standard of living equal to that which you are accustomed. As long as you

carry yourself in a manner befitting a grand duchess, you may do whatever you wish. I don't require that the grand duchess rule collaboratively with me. I have more than enough helping hands as it is. It's perfectly acceptable for you to fulfill your duties only when necessary."

Princess Henriette still remained silent in response to this barrage of rather cold statements.

After all this bluntness, the prince softened his tone slightly and asked, "Penny for your thoughts on the 'real me' you've been longing to meet? I've no doubt you would have been happier believing in a daydream. Surely a princess can do without all this hard reality."

She looked up at last. "You're wrong." Her dark eyes found him, and a smile appeared on her face that was neither false flattery nor a bold front. "It's quite odd. I always thought I'd be overwhelmed with anguish and break down crying. Instead, I feel invigorated. I won't say I'm not *at all* disappointed, but not enough to truly bother me. Primarily, my mind is eased. Thank you for telling me all of that. I mean that from the bottom of my heart."

"I suppose that makes us even," the prince said, a smile appearing on his face too. Though it looked like the same flawless smile he always wore, there was something of a different feel to it. He kneeled and took Princess Henriette by the hand. Even though he was a miserable sight, flour and soot still caking his clothes, the gesture was grand and elegant enough to overcome that. The stains were starting to look like badges of hard-fought victory, proof that he'd put all his passion and determination into reaching her. "Why don't we start afresh? You'll accept me as your companion in life, just as we've agreed, won't you?"

This entreaty from the prince who had overcome all manner of obstacles to get to her made roses bloom on the princess's cheeks. She looked every bit like a maiden in love once again. Seeming rather embarrassed, she nodded. "I will."

The housemaids and ladies-in-waiting all smiled broadly in joy. Julianne and I looked at one another and grinned too. Congratulations were in order, but the princess's reaction was a little unbelievable. The prince hadn't told her anything she'd dreamed to hear, but what he'd said was worth far more than any

superficial honeyed words. *Yes, just as I said, this is a lesson in the importance of honesty. Life is not a play. It doesn't always go according to a perfect script. The people one meets don't always play the roles assigned to them. They're driven by their own hearts and minds.*

"Has everything been resolved?" asked someone behind me.

"It has at last," I replied. Then gasped. "Wait a moment!"

I turned to see Lord Simeon climbing through the window frame. When I glanced outside, the ladder was no longer there. Though my husband looked entirely nonchalant, I looked at him, stunned. "How on earth did you get up here?"

"This sort of building can be scaled without a ladder."

Should you really be saying that in front of Prince Liberto? I had to wonder. *I'm quite certain he heard you.*

Once he was inside, Lord Simeon scanned the room. He was looking for Lutin, of course—which prompted me to do the same. Where had he gone? He'd apparently vanished at some point just as suddenly as he had appeared. *Perhaps he felt it wise to flee before Prince Liberto entered.*

Intending to explain that there was a misunderstanding at play, I began, "Lord Simeon, I..."

But he ignored me and stepped forward, walking past the tables and chairs in a beeline for a chest by the wall. The instant he reached it, he pounded on it with his fist as hard as he could. *Careful! That's palace furniture!* The thunderous sound gave everyone a fright—and then, from behind the chest, both Lutin and the mouse emerged.

"How were you hidden in such a narrow gap?!" I exclaimed.

The hiding place provided by the chest was so slight that it beggared belief a grown man—no less one as tall as Lutin—could squeeze himself into it. Chouchou resumed chasing the mouse, while Pearl jumped on top of Lutin.

"Ngh, do you have to—" he grunted as the frolicking dog licked his face. "I can't believe you found me, Vice Captain."

“You may think you’re the master of concealing yourself, but the pungent stench of a thief was still lingering in the air.”

“Hah. Trust the palace guard dog.” Lutin got up. “Go on then—sit! Roll over!”

Lord Simeon rested a hand on his saber. “Is that all you have to say?” As he glared at Lutin, the women watching gulped almost in unison.

A frigid voice then interrupted the scene, asking, “Bambino, what have you been doing here?”

Lutin froze. Though his standoff with Lord Simeon had done nothing to dull his ever-present dauntless grin, a cold sweat appeared to come over him now.

“Vice Captain Flaubert,” the prince said to Lord Simeon, affecting the most beautiful, radiant smile I had yet seen on his face. “You needn’t be shy. Cut him down at your leisure.”

My husband’s saber shot from its scabbard, the steel glinting. Screaming broke out again. The small mouse and the large black rat fled, chased by their respective tormentors. Lutin had clearly wanted to see every last moment of how his master won over the princess—and clearly, that had been a mistake.

Both the mouse and Lutin ran toward me and out of the window. Though I grabbed Chouchou at the very last second as she went to follow, Lord Simeon jumped out after Lutin. *I know I’m repeating myself, but this is the third floor! I swear!*

The housemaids and ladies-in-waiting collectively rushed over to the sill at once. They all applauded, their eyes and mouths wide, as the two men kept running, having apparently landed safely.

Chapter Fifteen

When Her Majesty received a full report from Sophie and me, she seemed glad, even if her smile indicated a touch of exasperation. “Thank you, Marielle. It sounds as though everyone else was in rather a tizzy, but Henriette herself became calm and collected. She was able to clear her addled mind and see everything anew. I truly appreciate your help.”

“Not at all. You were the one who insisted we give him everything we had, Your Majesty. All I did was lend my aid.”

At the base of the tower, the troops were withdrawing. The royal guards carried away the ladders and blankets. *Those blankets are going to be a nightmare to clean. The walls of the tower too. They’ve gotten mucky indeed. My apologies!*

“Yes, I did say that.” Her Majesty exchanged a glance with the king and let out a chuckle. “Still, I can’t say I imagined tactics of that nature.”

His Majesty chortled as well. “Simeon must be rather a henpecked husband!”

“N-No, not at all! I merely used this as a reference. It was provided by Duke Silvestre!” I held up the book on strategy insistently. I couldn’t bear any strange misunderstandings arising from this. *Lord Simeon is always the one lecturing me! I’m certainly not a dominant wife by any stretch of the imagination.*

Everyone within earshot laughed. Though such foolishness shouldn’t normally occur at the palace, perhaps it was all right once in a while. Even the royal guards, who in theory had been put through a great deal of trouble, appeared to be in high spirits.

As I was about to leave, I quietly took Princess Henriette aside. “I know Prince Liberto was rather cold to you, but you needn’t take everything he said to heart. It’s only true for now. You’ll be spending the rest of your lives together, so he can’t continue treating you as a tool forever. Make him *very* aware that this pawn is one who thinks and acts on her own, so he’d best be wary.”

She looked a tad surprised, but she laughed and nodded as she replied. “I see what you mean. Don’t worry—I won’t be beaten. I’ll show that man that I’m more than a pretty little doll.”

“That’s the spirit. Listen to me: there is not a single blackhearted fellow who cannot turn into a lovestruck puppy.”

Her eyes widened. “Excuse me?”

“There is not a single blackhearted fellow who cannot turn into a lovestruck puppy,” I repeated. “The expert schemers who use people as tools to suit their own purposes are exactly the ones who become utterly smitten once they *do* fall in love. Or perhaps they’re loyal in their hearts to one master alone, or family is the only thing they treasure. It’s like that in every story, isn’t it?”

“Now that you mention it...” she began after a pause. She read all the same books I did, so it didn’t take much recollecting for her to nod in agreement.

“You’ve shown that you’re neither a foolish woman who will believe whatever superficial kindness you are shown, nor are you a weak woman who will marry without asking a single question. In Prince Liberto’s mind, you are already a living, breathing human. It doesn’t matter if you’re not perfect or have embarrassing flaws. Keep showing him exactly who you are. I’m confident that the day he falls madly in love with you is not far off.”

“Perhaps,” she replied. “That would be nice.” Though doubt laced her voice, Princess Henriette wore a cheerful expression.

I wasn’t merely trying to make her feel better. I genuinely held that conviction. A sweet, honest young woman who’s sure of herself underneath it all is exactly right for that sort of gentleman. There was no doubt in my mind that they would become a happy couple.

My own beloved husband and I walked hand in hand as we took our leave. Disregarding the matter with Lutin, Lord Simeon had very much stayed on the sidelines and kept to a spectator role. Looking up, I said, “Thank you for helping me.”

“I didn’t do a thing,” he said after a moment, feigning innocence. One of his hands held mine, while the other carried the basket with Chouchou inside.

Nestling my cheek against his arm, I replied, “Not doing a thing was the biggest help of all. If you’d joined the fray, I’d never have stood a chance. It would have ruined the entire operation. Instead, you understood my thought process and were actually on my side— isn’t that right?”

He looked at me askance, not saying a word.

“You decided not to interfere and kept your distance. That gave me a fighting chance.”

“Watching was more than enough to make my head hurt.” With a sigh, he turned to look at me. His eyes held an amiable gleam. “You claimed it was all for Her Highness’s sake, but it was also partly as revenge for Prince Liberto’s treatment of Grace Blanche, wasn’t it?”

“To a certain extent. But I think my means were too reserved to that end. In reality, I’d like to give him quite a slap.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I wouldn’t actually!”

We walked on, chuckling to one another. Exhausted from the day’s activities, the cat was fast asleep in the basket.

“Speaking of Grace,” I said, recalling suddenly, “today is the final performance. I have tickets, so why don’t we go?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Are you certain you still have it in you after such a big day? I fear your fever might return.”

“It’s quite all right. I slept very well indeed last night. Are you not interested, Lord Simeon? I could ask Lord Noel to join me instead.”

“The hour would be far too late. The boy is too young for that.”

“You can’t treat him as a child forever, you know. He’ll be sixteen next month. Oh, what will I get him for his birthday? Of course—he wanted a model ship, didn’t he?”

“If it’s a birthday present, he won’t be satisfied unless it’s a mighty impressive one. Perhaps if we put in a special order now, it will arrive in time.” He paused a moment. “The thought of you and Noel going out for an evening together

makes me tremendously nervous about what trouble you might cause. I'll go." As he made this declaration, he wore the expression of a concerned parent.

I shrugged. *He could have simply been honest and said he wanted to go.*

The wind had grown cold. Under the guise of warming myself, I drew closer to my husband. *Tonight, let's all snuggle up together—you, me, and Chouchou—for a lovely, cozy night's sleep.*

Despite all that had occurred, the final performance went off without a hitch. The curtain fell on the show to applause and cheering. Afterward, I went to Grace's dressing room with a bouquet of flowers. She looked thoroughly invigorated. Smiling, she told me, "You've helped us so much—all of you. That's the only reason we were able to carry on performing and finish the run. Thank you."

"Tonight's performance was truly excellent. We should be thanking you for the wonderful show. Bravo!"

After the initial pleasantries, I tried asking a little about how her conversation with Prince Liberto had gone. Even though I was in no position to be poking my nose into things, I was still curious.

"The business about the will and such?" Grace replied, her tone largely indifferent. "I turned it down without a second thought. I love performing. Even if I'm not the star, just being on stage makes me happy. I don't need anything else. I'll admit it was quite a surprise to learn what sort of character my maternal grandfather was, but the prince seems to have that matter well in hand. He promised that he won't allow any harm to come to us, and that's everything I need."

"I understand not wanting the social status," I said, "but surely you could at least accept some of the inheritance. The prince didn't threaten you into refusing it, did he?"

"Marielle," Lord Simeon began, admonishing me for my overly frank question.

With a chuckle, Grace shook her head. "Don't worry. He never threatened

me. He offered me a deal. People of high social standing lead complicated lives, it seems. They have all sorts of things they need to protect. For me, all I truly want is to continue as an actress.”

It didn’t sound as if she were saying this purely to defend Prince Liberto. To Grace, that really was the long and short of it. *I imagine he impressed upon her that being a member of the grand ducal family isn’t all sunshine and rainbows. Which is true, as a matter of fact. It would be no life for a woman like Grace who’s used to living freely.*

The door suddenly opened and a young woman’s face appeared. It was the actress who’d played the lead role. “Grace, we’re leaving for the cast party. Are you—” Taking notice of Lord Simeon and myself, she rushed to apologize. “I’m so sorry!”

With an apologetic look at us, Grace replied, “At the usual place?”

“That’s right. You’re coming, aren’t you?”

“Of course. You go on ahead and I’ll catch up.”

“All right. Sorry for barging in!” With a rather formal curtsy, she closed the door.

First she badmouths Grace, then she wants her to come to their party. I suppose I’ve no need to worry about bad blood here.

“I’m sorry about that,” Grace apologized.

“It seems the misunderstandings have been cleared up,” I said.

“Absolutely.” She smirked and let out a chuckle. “We argue all the time, by the way. This wasn’t exactly unique. Still, we all share a love of the stage, so however we might bicker, we give it our all.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

If we kept Grace too long, she would be late for the cast party. We thus decided to say our goodbyes. Grace put on an overcoat and left the dressing room with us, saying that she’d see us out.

“One condition of the prince’s proposal was that he’d provide me with financial backing from now on, but I turned that down as well. If it were

patronage from someone who gave it because they truly love theater, I would gladly accept. But if it's purely for the sake of a deal, then I don't need it. There is part of me that would like to meet my half-brother, but I doubt he'd be entirely welcoming. Nor do I really see the prince or the grand duke as my relatives anyway. It's probably better to keep our lives separate, as they always have been. My adoptive father raised me with love and affection, and he told me all kinds of stories about my mother, so I've never thought of myself as unhappy."

"You truly do seem happy, Grace."

"I am. I even have a beau. My only problem right now is when I should introduce him to Father."

"Goodness. I wonder who it is."

As we reached the exit, the lead actress appeared before us again, apparently not having left for the party after all. She looked very flustered indeed. "Grace! Come quickly!"

"What's the matter? I told you to go on ahead."

"No, you don't understand! Outside, there's... Just hurry!" She grabbed Grace by the arm and dragged her away.

With no idea what was going on, Grace went along with her. Lord Simeon and I exchanged a glance and followed.

Though I'd have expected the majority of the audience to have gone home by now, the entrance hall was still packed and quite a stir could be heard out front. I picked up the pace, worried that something awful had happened again. Lord Simeon kept in front of me and helped part the waves of people.

When we made it outside, I saw white flecks dancing among the lamplight. "Snow?"

My breath formed clouds in the air and a chill ran through me as the wind touched my exposed skin. The night had grown cold indeed. *I suppose we're getting to the season when a light snowfall is to be expected... I'm surprised it's so heavy, though.* Yet my shock was only momentary, for I soon saw that what was falling around us was not snow, but flowers fluttering softly in the breeze.

All manner of blooms surrounded us, large and small. They rained down, making the dark sky feel like something out of a dream. Many of the varieties weren't even in season at this time of year. They painted the night in shades more striking than snow ever could, and the fragrance was sweeter than even a dream. The flowers fell on the stairs and paving stones, piling up around our feet.

One spot nearby had particularly captured the crowd's attention. A statue in the row of figures, a god of music, had a box at its feet with a ribbon around it. Attached was a message card. Someone nearby read it aloud, so I didn't need to go over and look myself.

"To everyone at the Théâtre d'Art, tonight's performance truly was incredible. Allow me to commend you all from the bottom of my heart. To Miss Grace Blanche in particular, I would like to share something from your late benefactor that he unfortunately didn't manage to give you before he passed. Though he wasn't an entirely admirable person, he deeply cared for you in his own way. If possible, it would be nice if you remembered him once in a while. Signed, Lutin."

Grace picked up the card and the gift. We stayed at a distance and merely watched. *I'm sure this will be on all the front pages tomorrow. They don't even know who the present is really from, but Lutin's name alone is enough to cause a stir. He'll be applauded as a stylish gentleman thief—though I doubt the real Lutin will be thrilled at his name being appropriated like this.*

Without turning, I said to the man who'd walked up beside me, "Couldn't you have delivered it under your own name?"

I heard a puff of laughter. "I'm sure you'd only feel like there must be more going on underneath. Another gift from the lying prince, or some such."

"You're still holding a grudge, aren't you?" I replied.

"All credit to you. You presented me with a rather unique experience. I understand why my man is so taken with you. For my taste, you're entirely too lacking in demure charm, but I suspect you'd be perfect for him."

Lord Simeon cleared his throat. *Honestly, it could be much worse. That he's saying all this in your presence says good things about his character.* I drew my

cheek up to my husband's chest. Even if my overly spirited nature put him at his wits' end and often prompted him to scold me, he wasn't the sort of person to try to hold me down. *I love you from the bottom of my heart, my protector, keeping me safe in your broad chest.*

Above my head, I heard a sneeze. The flowers were still falling. Collecting them all must have cost not only a great deal of money, but also quite some effort. Even buying up the stock of every florist in Sans-Terre might not have provided enough. Perhaps it was a punishment for Lutin after watching his master's struggles with such glee—he'd been forced to run around and gather them all. *I only hope those two standing up on the roof don't catch a cold.*

"While I was here, I was hoping to achieve my secondary goal of helping a man who's like a younger brother to me in his romantic endeavors. I even gave him the perfect opportunity, but he was too much of a spineless coward to take it."

So he knew all about that incident as well. There was a hint of laughter in his voice. I wrapped an arm around Lord Simeon in an effort to keep him from getting angry.

"To think that after all that he's said, he can't bring himself to kidnap you for real. Perhaps he's afraid that you'll hate him if he uses force. This despite the fact that there are all sorts of ways to take advantage of a good-natured young lady. Where you're concerned, it seems he becomes equally good-natured."

Lord Simeon was literally shaking. *Hold it in. Please, I beg you.*

"I was surprised to learn that he still has any such sweetness left in him," the man standing next to me continued.

"You truly talk about him like a real older brother," I said.

"I've known him since we were children, after all. I took both of them out of the gutter and raised them myself. Speaking of which, I hear you've been longing to know his real name. Shall I tell you? I can share all the details of his past as well."

Lord Simeon looked down at me, an indefinable look in his light blue eyes.

I shook my head, however. "No, that's quite all right. I'm waiting for him to

decide he's happy to tell me. If someone else spoils it, it wouldn't mean anything."

"What a thing to say when you don't even have any romantic interest in him. You're a wicked woman indeed."

Suddenly, I could hear singing. The rich, carefree voice quieted the clamorous crowd—it was Grace. Her song was a joyful number from tonight's performance that conveyed her feelings toward the gift and her response to it.

After we spent a short while listening, I heard footsteps beside me. The man had turned and begun to walk off without even a goodbye. "Who knows?" he said, pausing. "Perhaps I shall have to find a way to procure you. I'm sure the princess would be thrilled for you to come to Lavia."

"For all that you treat him as your adorable younger brother, you don't seem to understand. I'm quite sure he likes the current situation. He enjoys sparring not only with me, but with my husband too. That's why he's all talk rather than an actual kidnapper."

The man laughed again. "He really is a spineless coward."

And with that, he departed. We watched him go as he disappeared beyond the crowd. By now, the flowers had stopped falling. In their place, real snow was drifting down through the night sky. It fluttered among the buildings and lamps like dancing fairies announcing the arrival of winter.

Unable to contain his rage any longer, Lord Simeon spat, "Both master and servant are equally detestable."

I clasped my hands around his cold cheeks—a signal for him to bend down. He complied, giving me a light kiss that was no more than a peck, then wrapped his arms around me to share his body heat.

"Maybe masters and servants are always peas in a pod," I suggested. "You and Prince Severin also share in your serious dedication."

"Compared to Prince Liberto, Lutin at least has a certain charm, I suppose, but I still can't stand him."

"I'm sure the feeling is mutual. At the same time, he enjoys squabbling with

you. You and he are friends at this point as well.”

Making a face of deep disgust, he said emphatically, “I could not imagine disagreeing with anything more strongly.”

I couldn’t help bursting into laughter. *Indeed! I’m sure Lutin would say exactly the same thing.*

The chill breeze and the snow didn’t bother me one bit. All those present had stopped milling about to listen attentively to Grace. Her dream-like performance was still going.

Everyone’s thoughts and feelings intertwine to form an infinite number of stories. A love that cannot be leads to the next, and a new tale is given life. Everyone is the main character on the stage of life, co-starring with the main characters of other stories as comedies and tragedies are woven.

Exchanging a smile, Lord Simeon and I walked off. *The curtain has only just risen on our own play. What new twist will occur tomorrow? When we get back to our warm home, let’s rest up in preparation for our next moment on stage.*

Autumn was ending and winter was beginning. The season when the city would be blanketed in white was nearly upon us. *On a night when I long for home so much, I’m happy not to be alone, but to be walking with you. Letting this happiness warm our hearts, let’s return home, nestling against each other to keep the cold at bay. The cat will be curled up in front of the fireplace waiting for us.*



The Benediction of Prince Liberto

He'd only happened to go into the city to get a look at it. He hadn't expected to find two children on the verge of death.

Liberto kept his distance from the red-nosed man sitting up in bed and sneezing repeatedly. The figure overlapped with the boy in his memory. He'd grown up quickly, developing a finer physique than Liberto's own. But seeing him ill and confined to bed—a rare sight indeed—reminded Liberto of when they had first met.

“You seem to be suffering rather a lot,” said Liberto, his face and voice tender.

He heard a quiet murmur. “Who's fault is that?”

Being a kind master, Liberto of course pretended not to hear that. “The rest of us will return to Lavia, but you should rest here until you're recovered. I've asked the embassy staff here to take good care of you.”

“No, I'm not in such a bad way.”

“You needn't put on a brave face. It's perfectly fine if you don't come back to Lavia for the time being.”

Shock lurked in the man's blue eyes in response to this pronouncement of near-exile disguised as generosity. Liberto met his reaction with a broad grin.

“How long is ‘for the time being’?” the man asked after a moment.

“A good question indeed. How long should it be, I wonder?”

The man's shock turned to vigilant caution as he tried to read Liberto's true intentions. He soon exploded into sneezing again, however, and the tension broke entirely.

Liberto laughed gently. “If you'd like to come home, you'll have to fulfill a task for me. Tell her your name. Then you can return.”

Between bursts of blowing his nose, the man murmured, “What sort of a task

is...”

His tone lacked any of its usual force or breeziness. As far as Liberto was concerned, in this state, the man was very much the cute little boy he had once been—the bambino. The name he’d made as a mysterious thief was lionized among the people, but to Liberto, that was no more than a front he put up.

“She’s waiting for you to tell her your name yourself. I was ready to do it, but she declined. Why won’t you reveal it, I wonder? Surely you would prefer it if she called you by your real name.”

The man didn’t respond to this.

“Do you dislike the name I gave you that much?” Liberto asked.

“That’s not it exactly,” he replied, though his sigh said he indeed found it quite unpleasant and inconvenient. “I can’t tell her I have a name like that.”

“How very mean. I put so much thought into it.”

“You definitely meant it ironically. You were making a joke, I’m sure of it. Of all possible choices, why did you call me *that*?”

“If you’re going to talk like that, you can stay here for the rest of your life.” The prince raised his chin standoffishly. The man looked more perturbed by the moment. Liberto felt like shrugging his shoulders. There was surely no need for his subordinate to be so stubborn.

Liberto hadn’t chosen the name with any sense of irony, but with a genuine wish that it would bring him happiness. It was true that Liberto himself had still been a child at the time, so there was no denying it was a straightforward choice. Yet even so, Liberto had earnestly prayed for the light of God to reach the small child he found. That much was irrefutable.

Even though they were right under the grand duke’s nose, the slums were filled with poverty and crime. The day that Liberto had found two boys cowering in a corner, he’d gone out in secret to see the city for himself. Though his grandfather and his parents turned a blind eye to them, Liberto had decided from an early age the slums were an important matter to address. He’d believed that if he waited until he inherited the title of grand duke, it would be far too late. So, at fifteen, he put his mind to doing whatever he could.

Asking close aides to accompany him, he'd ventured out into the slums and seen with his own eyes the truth that neither his parents nor his teachers had told him about. That was when he happened upon two children being assaulted by grown men, possibly to the point of murder if he hadn't interceded. Naturally, Liberto ordered his guards to save them.

When he asked about their reasons, the assaulting men explained that the two boys had stolen some food. If their poverty was so appalling that they couldn't even have any compassion for children, then it was almost understandable, but the prince could not possibly brook such violence. Furthermore, further investigation revealed that the men weren't in such dire straits after all.

People who found their way to the slums, whether because they were criminals to begin with or because poverty had forced them into a life of crime, formed gangs to carry out thefts and burglaries. Such groups would often employ children as well, as they could sneak through small gaps and windows that adults couldn't. They were rewarded with food, but it was inconvenient for them to grow too large, so they were only fed the bare minimum. Unable to bear the hunger, the two boys Liberto found had stolen a bite to eat and earned themselves a severe beating upon being caught.

The older brother's emaciated body appeared to have broken bones in several places; no doubt he'd fought doggedly to protect his younger brother. The younger boy's tongue had been cut out and he was barely breathing. They were in such bad shape that even the doctor who attended them was taken aback. If Liberto and his guards hadn't happened to walk past, both of them would have undoubtedly died in short order.

When the older brother opened his eyes after receiving thorough medical attention, the first words out of his mouth were an entreaty to the prince. *"Please save Dario. I'm begging you. I'll do anything. I can be useful to you. I have a talent for climbing up to high places, and I can pick locks. I'll do whatever you ask, so please, save Dario."*

Hearing this, Liberto noticed a calculating undertone uncommon for a child. The boy was presenting himself as a pitiful urchin to the virtuous noble in an attempt to earn more assistance. Growing up in the slums had given him

something of an education, it seemed. Liberto decided that if such shrewdness could be developed further, this boy could become a very skilled underling indeed. Liberto's reason for saving him had been pure and compassionate. Yet if the boy could prove a valuable resource, there was no reason not to keep him and train him.

"I'm sorry to say it, but your brother's tongue won't heal. It's a true shame, but I'm told he'll never speak again."

"Really?" An unaffected expression of despair overtook the boy's bruised face. He looked over at his younger brother, who still hadn't opened his eyes. His countenance was a shade that made Liberto's heart ache as well.

"His tongue won't heal, but he'll otherwise make a complete recovery, I promise. I will take responsibility for both you and Dario. You'll be under my protection. In the name of the Lavian heir, Liberto Fontana, I will restore you to health."

The boy's blue eyes then looked back at Liberto. The prince smiled. *"So don't forget the promise you just made."*

More than ten years had passed since then. The weak state he'd found the boys in seemed some long-forgotten dream now, as both of them had grown up hale and hearty. Just as Liberto had expected, they'd become exceptional servants. The older brother was more of a strong-willed rascal, and he'd been perpetrating a little too much mischief, but it was amusing to see that he still had enough of a cute side left in him that he could sulk and such.

"Over here, Dario. You're coming home with me," called the prince.

With that, the large man (who had been devotedly taking care of the bedridden man who was like an older brother to him) opened wide his eyes—eyes fringed by long eyelashes—and shook his head firmly. As Liberto had later learned, the two boys weren't real brothers, but a pair who'd banded together like siblings all the same. Due to the abuse he had suffered as a child, Dario remained afraid of people to this day, so he single-mindedly followed his older brother figure, who had always protected him.

His statuesque face fervently implored the prince, begging him not to tear him from his older brother in such a state. Ignoring this, Liberto called his name

again. "Dario."

The man in bed sighed and patted his large friend. Against his will, Dario walked over to the prince with heavy steps like a cow to the slaughterhouse.

"So...does this also mean I'm on leave from work?" the man asked.

"On leave? Yes, indeed. If I have another task for you, I'll let you know."

This was an intentionally malicious answer, which put a hint of unease in the man's blue eyes. Unlike when he was a boy, he could go off and live as he pleased now if so chose, yet he still wanted to stay with the master he had no direct tie to. Perhaps he wasn't aware of it himself, but it was quite adorable. Liberto couldn't help teasing him for it.

When the man was born, his father hadn't shown the slightest shred of interest in him. In despair, his mother had discarded her suckling babe and disappeared. Those who had been left to care for the child initially did so out of concern for his father, but once they realized this concern was misplaced and pointless, they threw the baby out. That child no one had wanted, whom no one had even graced with a name, yearned for love deep down. He bragged that he had long since forgotten about all that, but scars suffered as a child do not simply disappear.

"All you have to do is tell her your name. If you do that, you can come back," the prince reminded him.

"What a meaningless thing to make me do."

"If it's so meaningless, it shouldn't pose any difficulty, should it?"

This left the bedridden man with nothing to say. Did he not understand the effort to help him obtain the woman he'd fallen for? Why was he grumbling so much? Liberto couldn't make sense of it. Just as the bedridden man thought of Dario as a younger brother, Liberto saw them both as his adorable younger siblings. He had provided a somewhat specialized education for them, but as promised, he had raised them in safety.

"You don't have to go to such pains," the man assured him. "I'm enjoying the current status quo perfectly well."

“Don’t be so spineless. You’re not going to shy away just because she’s married, are you? If you want something, you should take it. Her husband is a dull man with no merits except his physical strength. Outmaneuvering him would be easy, I’m sure.”

After blowing his nose again, the man replied in a quiet tone, “He’s not a man to make light of so casually.”

“Oh?” Liberto was surprised at this objection.

The look in the man’s eyes spoke to decidedly mixed feelings. “Admittedly, he has no sense of fun and is serious beyond a fault. He lacks any kind of charm. He makes me furious, and I hate him. I hate him, but...”

Liberto hadn’t even asked, but the man continued laying out all these excuses, becoming increasingly irate in the process.

“He hates me too, but even so, when push comes to shove, he’ll come to my aid without a moment’s hesitation. He really lacks any kind of flexibility. No matter who’s in danger, he’ll unconditionally spring into action. He always keeps any promise he makes, and he approaches every situation with reason and logic, though that irritates me a great deal and makes me hate him all the more.”

Liberto listened with quite some astonishment. This was high praise for a nemesis, much less a romantic rival. Given the man’s eagerness to refute Liberto’s initial remark, it seemed his hate was only superficial.

“Hard as it is to stomach...there is a reason she’s so in love with him.”

Liberto remembered what the lady in question had said. *I see, so this country does have more than one draw after all.*

“Well then, you’d better try even harder.”

To hide the smile forming on his face, Liberto turned on his heel. Leaving the cold-addled man behind, he pulled Dario by the arm and headed for the door. He pretended not to hear the groan of complaint.

“Oh, that’s right.” Remembering just before he left, Liberto turned around. “I forgot one thing. Bressa is saying belatedly that he wants to claim his child.

What would you like me to do?”

The bedridden man’s expression did not change one whit. “Why are you asking me? I don’t acknowledge any other parents.”

“Very well. Then I shall deal with him together with Bagni.”

One of the Scalchi familia’s higher-ups had already been sentenced to prison in Liberto’s mind. There was no need to discuss it beyond that. He’d support his subordinate in his romantic endeavors, but he had no desire to put his adorable little brother on a path of revenge. This was all for the best.

“Well then, keep warm and get plenty of rest, Angelo.”

That last portion, spoken in the gentlest of tones, made the sickly man’s face visibly tense. “I knew you picked that name ironically, you— Achoo! Achoo! W-Wait...”

Laughing loudly, Liberto left the room, dragging Dario with him. *You don’t have to be embarrassed just because it doesn’t suit you. I’m sure that she won’t laugh. She’ll say it’s a good name.*

But there was one detail that not even Liberto knew. How could he claim to have no trust in God or anything of the like, to bluntly declare he had no connection to God whatsoever, only to turn around and call himself an angel? Unaware of that pitiful, hopeless conundrum, the master left.

The man was left alone in the room, cradling his head in agony that wasn’t only the fault of his cold.

Afterword

Wherever Marielle goes, trouble follows. She always gets wrapped up in it and wraps others up in it, and now we have eight volumes of it. This makes four of them as an engaged couple and four of their married life.

Given that I started writing this series on a whim, I can't help being surprised that it's continued this long. I'm grateful to so many people: all of you readers, everyone at the publisher including the editorial staff, Maro who enlivens the story with wonderful illustrations, and Alaskapan who makes the must-read manga version. It's thanks to you that we've reached eight volumes. I appreciate all the support from the bottom of my heart.

Now, the end of the previous volume prefaced this a little bit, but Prince Liberto finally appears. He's the one who's always been behind Lutin's orders. You could say he's a behind-the-scenes character, quietly manipulating things in the background. Now he finally shows his face.

His name was first mentioned as far back as volume 2, wasn't it? He's been around since quite an early stage. I'd already decided what kind of person he would be, and I had more or less determined his connection to Lutin, but that in itself meant I couldn't make him show up any old time. I dragged it out until the right moment, because when Liberto appears, we inevitably have a story about Lutin, right?

You could say that Lutin was secretly the lead this time. It might upset Simeon, but he got his day in the sun last time, so he had to make way. It's fine for him to be the hero watching over the action from the background.

With that, Lutin's name and past have been revealed. Were they as you imagined? The reason he isn't uncouth despite his underworld origins is that he was raised by Liberto, who would scold him for using any bad language. As a result, he can play the gentleman in front of Marielle without any extra effort—but when he's not being watched, he uses fairly bad language even now.

Considering it took so long for him to appear, Liberto's prominent role spelled

a great deal of trouble for Marielle and Simeon. It's quite inconvenient when final bosses keep showing up incessantly, so I'll have him exit stage left for now and prepare to welcome his lovely bride. If he has another appearance, maybe it will be at his wedding ceremony.

This series is longer than I'd have expected at eight volumes, but there are still episodes left I want to write. I haven't really delved into the Easdale side of the world yet, and I want to make Marielle and Simeon progress to the next step in their lives at some point. I don't know how long I'll be able to keep writing it, but for now, I hope you enjoyed this adventure—and I hope to see you again in the next volume.

Thank you for accompanying me this far.

—Haruka Momo

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